

Author: Kurone Kanzaki
Illustrator: Makoto Iino

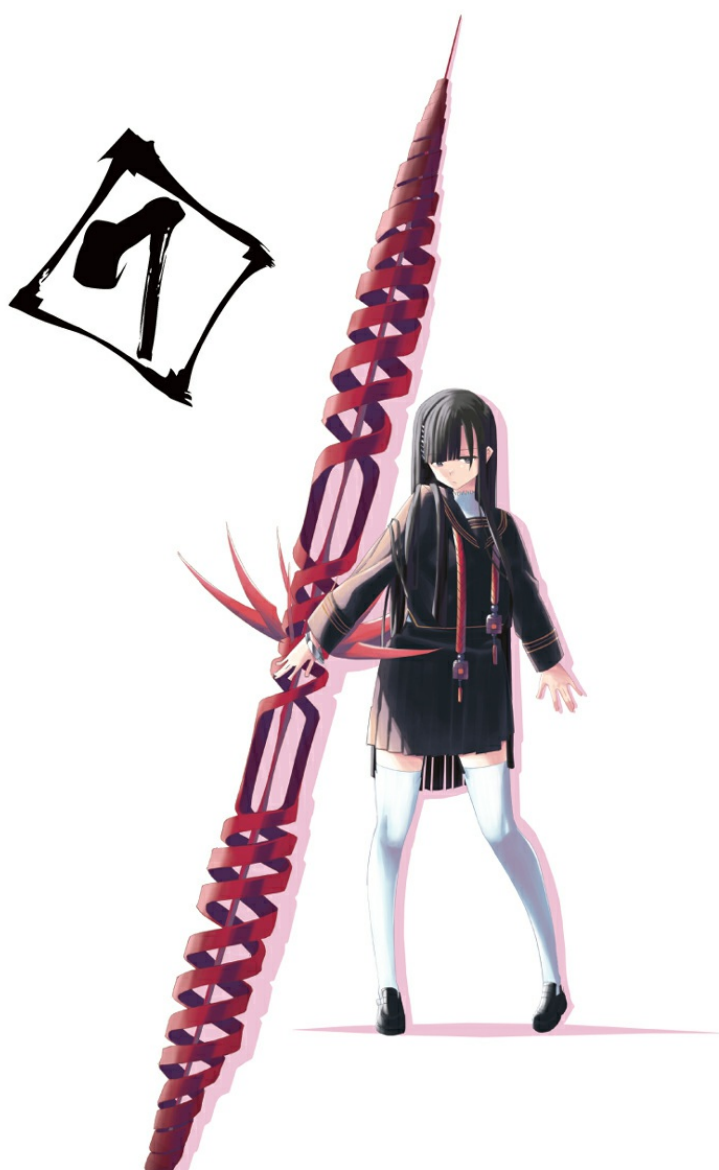


Demon Lord, Retry!

7



DEMON LORD, RETRY!



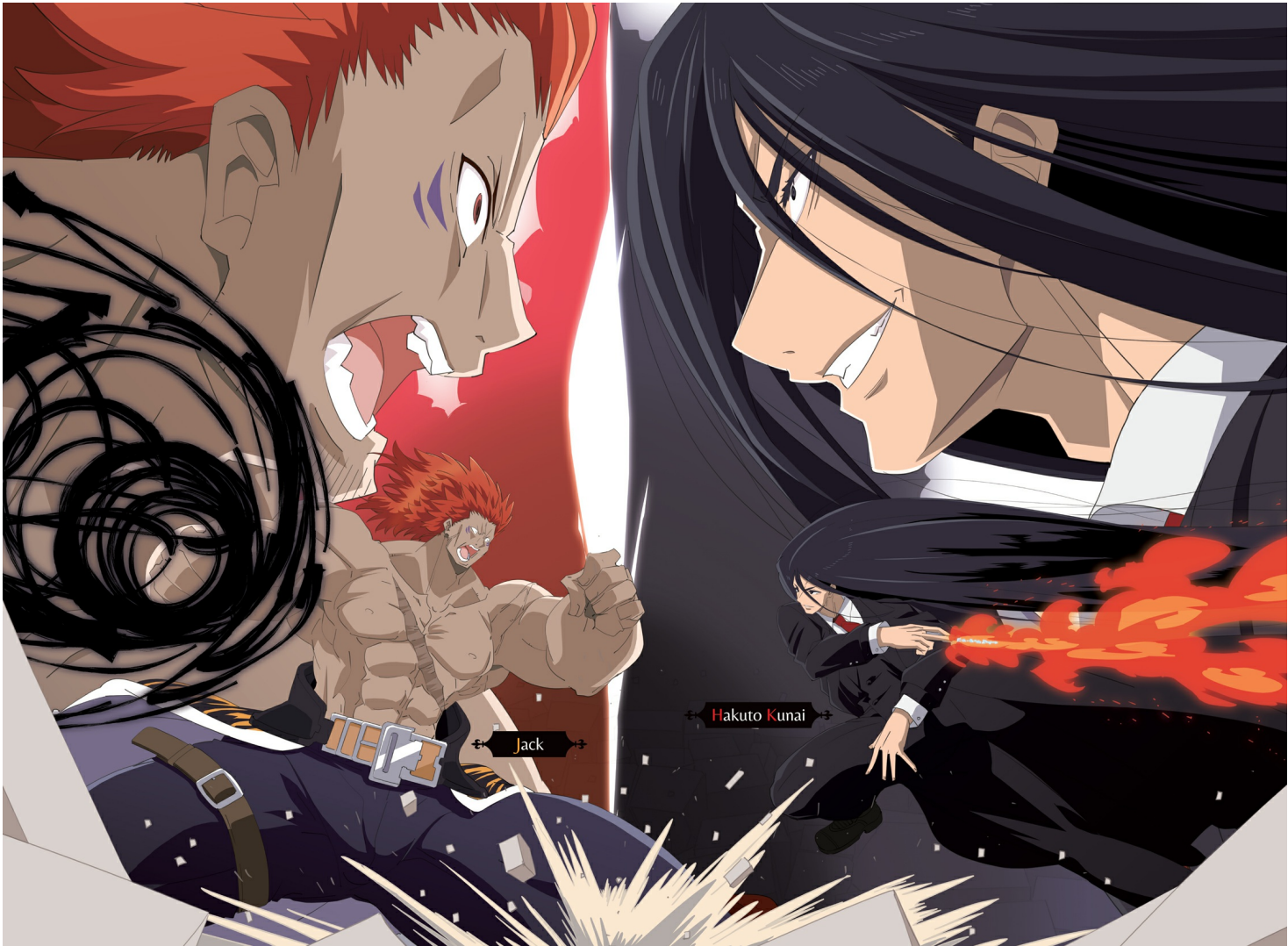




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Chapter 9: The Capital Burns

The Golden Age: Beyond the Contrails

In the year 199X, before the Infinity Game commenced, there was peace between the two parties occupying the familiar chat room. The pair had just made each other's acquaintance but seemed to be getting along swimmingly.

"I, like, totally dig this world and all, but it's missing a little somethin' somethin', don't you think?"

"I think your brain's missing a lot of something."

"Bully much? I'm trying to give you some sage-like advice here."

"I don't need anyone's advice about my world," Akira declared. He was still young then, brimming with the confidence that his talent was all that he needed to create big games. Perhaps many his age would have shared the same sense of invincibility.

"Like, it's *too* hammered out, y'know? Give it a little slack. You're narrowing your playerbase, man."

"Some slack, huh...?" Akira had been feeling it himself; nearly all of the players were male. Not exactly a healthy MMO environment.

"Real talk, where chicks flock, dudes flock. You dig? That's what your world's missing: Whimsy. Room to breathe."

"Thanks, prof. What's your genius idea?" Anyone could talk a big game. Akira hated those who didn't put their money where their mouths were.

But XX sent an unexpected reply: "*Magic*, Akira."

Akira froze for a moment. The concept seemed so irreconcilable with the MMO he was running. The Far East City of Chaos took place in the distant future of an alternate Earth. How could magic possibly fit into the post-apocalyptic cyberpunk world?

“Jeez, I knew you were into the occult and black magic crap...”

“Hear me out, will you? First of all...” XX started.

Apparently, the suggestion of including magic in Akira’s MMO was not a spur of the moment idea.

Akira was starting to skim through the messages until he realized how thorough and meticulous XX’s magical theory was. This was hardly a concept of the occult; the theory was as well structured as complex mathematical proofs, almost beautiful.

Soon, Akira found himself being drawn in...

“Class 1 through 10, with all the elements and their elevated forms... It is interesting.”

“Told you. I’ll email you the whole list, so put them all in, all right?”

“Wait, do you know how much work it’ll be to code all of those spells?!”

“Huh? How is that my problem? Isn’t that your *job*?”

“You don’t even *have* a job! I hope you wake up bald.”

“What the—?! That’s not funny, man! Not funny at all!”

XXX entered the chat room.

“You two are having a lively conversation as always.”

“Don’t point your finger at me.”

XXX read through the chat log and typed, “Mister Ono, this will take a lot of work. I can help, if you’d like?”

“Help...? Do you have any experience making video games?”

“Somewhat.”

Akira pondered that response, noticeably uneasy with the idea of opening up his world to someone else.

As if Akira’s face was showing through the computer screen, XXX added, “I’ll code and send a few samples first. If you like how they look, you can implement them.”

“All right...” Akira was amazed at how confident XXX was in his abilities and wondered if XXX worked at a video game company.

“And when it comes to combat, Mister Ono, you can lighten the processing load by...”

“Really, I never thought of that...”

The two continued discussing the game’s programming, graphics, servers...

After a while of this, XX began typing unintelligible messages, perhaps in protest.

“Qwertyuiopasdfghjklzxcvbnm.”

“You glitching out or something?”

“Ignore it. XX has the maturity of a five-year-old.”

“We have met the enemy... And they are ours!”

“Who are you, Commodore Perry?”

“Ignore it. XX clearly has a mental illness.”

The topic of the chat room was all over the place, but the conversation never ceased.

Even Akira, who often found himself tense with stress, couldn’t help but smile as he tirelessly worked at the keyboard.

“That makes sense, that would lessen the load...”

“I’d be happy to help with that too, or anything else.”

“Oh, right! I hit a milestone on a hit counter!”

Type type type.

The chat room symphony.

“Cool.”

“That’s all you got?!”

“Knowing XX, it was with the help of rapid-firing F5. What a POS.”

“There’s your verdict, XX,” Akira typed. “Your sentence: get a job.”

“More work, more problems... That’s my motto.”

“You’d get a Guinness World Record...for the dumbest human alive.”

The three chatted on and on.

A golden age filled with magic, now so far away.

All pain and troubles melted away like lemon drops beyond the contrails
across the sky.

Fatal Flaw

——Hellion Territory, the southeast region of the continent.

The region, which had been maintained in somewhat of a balance despite its constant unrest, was now plunged into full-blown turmoil thanks to the Demon Lord.

Many monsters from Belphegor's domain had survived the attack, their stories only fueling the chaos that swept up the rest of the devils' realm. All of them corroborated that the Demon Lord had invaded with an army of Anima. Many also mentioned Firebrands and humans amidst the attackers. The devils in other territories had laughed them all off until news spread that Belphegor's land had been desolated. While the inhabitants of Hellion Territory scrambled to discover the truth, some were quicker to action than others.

——Somewhere within Hellion Territory.

A vampire and a grand devil were facing off: one was clad in spotless, noble attire while the other was bleeding all over.

"I commend you for your efforts, Rookfell the Prideful."

"Silence... A mere vampire..."



Rookfell, a grand devil with a lion's head and six arms, had one of his enormous horns broken and had been beaten to a state unbecoming of his fearsome title. Evidently, the duel between him and the vampire was pitifully one-sided.

"Ever maintaining your prideful guise," the vampire muttered. "Color me impressed."

"A lowly beast that subsists on the blood of others... You will never take my territory from me!"

"I do not want for any territory. Only your proud strength."

"What is the meaning of this, Allit...? You've been cowering in your coffin all this time!"

Allit answered with an icy snicker. He had never been afraid of the unrest among the grand devils—he was simply uninterested in fighting over land.

"I crave contest in its purest form. The child's play you call war is a vile imitation of that."

"Silence, you lowly leech! Mosquito!" The grand devil dashed faster than his large stature seemed it would allow, unleashing an onslaught with four weapons from all directions. A longsword, club, battleaxe, and spear all tore into or bludgeoned the vampire, but a rainbow glow immediately enveloped Allit and healed his wounds entirely.

"A storm-like attack that barely gives the opponent a chance to blink... A very prideful style of combat. It suits you well."

"How dare you...!" Rookfell's lion mane shook with rage at Allit's perfect poise. No matter how many deadly attacks he unleashed, Allit's wounds were healed in seconds. This one-sided mockery of combat was nothing short of blazing humiliation.

"I meant no offense by it. I do consider you a head above the rest, believe it or not. Just some decades ago, I'd heard you fancied a trip down to the human realm and enjoyed a few brawls."

The lion-headed devil finally lowered his weapons. He knew not how, but he finally accepted that his attacks were accomplishing nothing. “Hmph... As much as I enjoy a formidable foe, I relish the pleasure of stomping out ants.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Allit grinned, his eyes narrowing.

The devil took the time to observe their surroundings: his grandiose palace had been reduced to rubble, smoke rising here and there. Countless corpses littered the scene.

“How did you gain such power...?” the lion asked.

“I do not owe you, the loser of our contest, an explanation.”

“Yes. You’re right about that.” He tossed his weapons aside and quietly approached Allit, clearly admitting his defeat. “Then answer me this: with my blood, what will you fight?”

“What if I told you...the dragon?”

“Gaw ha ha! Go on! Drink my blood, if you dare!”

Allit swiftly sunk his fangs into Rookfell’s neck, but just as he did, the lion clasped his jaw around the vampire’s neck, as if to tear it open with his teeth.

“Remember this, Allit: I stand undefeated. Watch as I devour you from within!”

A truly bizarre scene unfolded as the pair of enemies dug their fangs into the other’s neck. In a way, however, this was the essence of demonic contest.

The vampire drew out the grand devil’s blood with such vigor that it was as if he was inhaling Rookfell’s soul. Rookfell quickly shriveled up like a mummy and crumbled into black dust.

“Prideful to the end... You were similar to the dragon in that way.” With coldhearted content, Allit savored the hot new blood coursing through his veins, which gave him power he had not felt before. “Rather barbaric for my liking, but brute force may become necessary to kill him...”

With one last gaze at the obliterated palace, Allit flew high into the air. Black bats surrounded him, transforming the vampire into a giant bat himself. An ominous flutter of his wings, and he was gone.

—Meanwhile, elsewhere in Hellion Territory.

Another contest, or more accurately, a wicked feast, was nearing its conclusion.

“I feel power! I grow stronger!”

“That’s right. Don’t waste any of this delicious meat... Some of them are a bit well done, though!” Kale cackled as he floated in the air, holding his oversized scythe. The very picture of innocent cruelty.

“You gave me treasure too. I little full now...”

“That’s sissy talk! You call *this* gluttony? Chug, chug, chug!”

“Grm...”

“And you better finish all of the stuff I grabbed from the treasury too. I worked hard getting those.”

Kale was speaking to Beelzebub, the grand devil of gluttony. His appearance resembled a disfigured Frankenstein’s monster, except with an extra mouth on each palm and another on his gut with numerous jagged teeth. Beelzebub was going full-speed ahead, eating all he could with the mouths on his face, palms, and torso.

“Ha-Satan didn’t stand a chance against you, Bel. Oh, I might mix you up with the sloth one with that nickname... Oh, well! He’s dead, so who cares?” Kale laughed.

Beelzebub continued ingesting the treasure around him that Kale had stolen from Belphegor’s castle.

“Sloth dead? I didn’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it, you’re Bel Junior, now! Hurray!”

“Junior? I don’t know... I eat! *Grmph*.” The devil shoveled down more and more silver and gold, exquisite weapons, and priceless masterpieces of art as if they were all pig feed.

“Kale... What...are you...scheming at...?” Ha-Satan squeezed out as his lower

body was slowly ingested by Beelzebub's gut-mouth. A pitiful end to a grand devil with a graceful, wolf-like appearance, whose unstoppable wrath had terrorized his foes... Now a mere piece of meat waiting to be devoured.

Kale's face split into a malicious grin. "You're still alive, Ha? Just die already. Splish!" He swung his scythe down, delivering the fatal and silencing blow. "Oh no! It would have been so much funnier to watch you eat him alive! I did it again..."

"Funny no make me full. I smart, I know."

"Aha ha ha! You know what, Bel? *You're* the funniest!"

Even as the banter continued, Ha-Satan's corpse disappeared as the pile of treasure around them rapidly diminished. With every bite, the gluttonous devil seemed to grow larger and more powerful.

"Come on, Bel Junior! Keep eating!"

"I like eat. No like move," Gluttony replied without vigor. Even among the seven grand devils who each embodied an original sin, Beelzebub's power was exceptional. He devoured anything in sight, and his strength increased proportionately. No ally or foe could withstand his hunger, and eventually he had devoured the entirety of his territory. He was left completely alone in the desolate land. Whether he was too lazy or too hungry to move, Beelzebub had been weakening by the day, steadily heading towards disintegration.

"Bel... Who saved you from the brink of death? Remember?"

"You..."

"You're better now because I gave you a bunch of powerful treasures, right? So you'll have to listen to me. Kill, kill, kill, and eat, eat, eat!" Kale cheerfully commanded.

"I full now. I stronger than you." Beelzebub lifted his arm and recklessly swung it at Kale.

Kale dove out of the way, but the impact blew him back. "I strong. You weak. I no listen to you."

"Shit, this is why I hate brainless dipshits. Why do I have to deal with this

disgusting idiot...?”

“Brain...less? You call me stupid?!”

“No, no... More brains, more problems, I say. Put your fist down...” Kale lazily dusted himself off and produced an item he had been saving: a full set of armor. “If you promise to do what I say, I’ll let you eat this.”

“Shiny... Wow! I want eat!”

“It’s seen some use, but legend has it the War Maiden Valkyria wore this very armor.”

It gleamed mysteriously, made of a material unlike iron, steel, or any monster part. Kale had ventured into the human realm just to get his hands on it.

“I want! I eat!”

“You want to eat it? You know what you have to do.” Grinning, Kale tossed the armor onto the ground.

Beelzebub leapt onto it and felt a sharp pain in his right eye. Kale’s scythe was struck deep into his socket.

“Argh! My eye! Owwww!”

“Yeah, I’d have a tough time fighting you head-on... So why would I ever do that? Don’t fuck with me, fatass. You hear me?” Kale snarled, twisting Beelzebub’s eye with the scythe.

Losing his will to fight, the gluttonous devil cried, “O-Okay! You say, I do! For now!”

“For now... Ugh, you really are brainless, Bel Junior...” Kale sighed and withdrew his scythe. Beelzebub was truthful and seemed to have no intention of following Kale’s orders for long. For better or worse, deception was not Beelzebub’s sin. “Now that you’ve had your fill, let’s look for our next prey!”

“I hate you! I kill you! I eat you tomorrow!”

“Come on, tomorrow? That’s a little too early, don’t you think?” Kale remarked and exited from the throne room, Beelzebub following. All that was left behind was deafening silence and table scraps.

With the fall of Belphegor, the delicate power balance of Hellion Territory had collapsed. Like breaking a cornerstone would lead to a building collapse, the status quo of the territory had crumbled. The collapse of Hellion Territory and its aftermath were sure to reach human civilization.

Normal and Special

——Somewhere in the Northern Nations.

A caravan was marching down a travel road, guarded by knights on all sides. Refugees crowded the road, many of them looking like bandits. They wantonly watched the caravan, but the knights violently drove them away with their weapons.

“Make way! Stand back!”

“Beggars... Stay away!”

The knights were on guard, knowing full well the danger of stopping in a place like this.

Akane looked out from within the carriage in the center of the caravan and sighed. “It’s a tough world out there, isn’t it...?”

“Just where do you think you are?” a well-built woman answered from across the carriage. “And you were trying to walk through all of that alone... What rock were you raised under?” The woman was wearing all black, including a black veil over her face, lending to a peculiar air about her.

“Refugees, huh... It’s sad losing your home.”

“And it’s about time you told me about yours. Your daddy a noble?”

“I’m not nobility. Just a regular rags-to-idol story!”

“There you go with the nonsense again... Nobles shelter their daughters too much.” The woman in black pinched her brow. She had rushed to pick Akane up as she was starting to walk down the travel road without a care in the world. While Akane’s clothes were unfamiliar to the woman, their quality was good enough for her to take notice. Combined with her smooth hands, well-kept hair, and untanned skin, Akane convincingly looked the part of a sheltered rich girl.

“What are these people going to do, Mama?” Akane asked.

“Worry about yourself, girl,” Mama shut her down. Despite her alto voice and muscular build, there was a certain sensuality about her.

“Excuse the interruption,” a knight called from outside the carriage. “I’ve something to report, Big Mama.”

“What is it? Open the window already,” she sharply answered. If she weren’t clad in mourning, she might have passed for a bandit herself.

“The Madam’s caravan has already reached the town ahead.”

“Bad news for us... Great news for the folks here, I’m sure.”

“Shall we change course?”

“We’re going back to Icaros. Looks like we’re going to be disappointed everywhere we go.”

The Madam’s influence was on the rise as her enormous caravan toured through any town and village in its path, buying practically anything they came across. This was nothing short of a godsend for those who made their living by selling. On the other hand, it was nothing short of a disaster for any looking to buy; imagine a giant whale leaping out of nowhere and swallowing their entire catch. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow it cast. And so the world turned.

“The butterfly of Holylight... I don’t hate her style, but she needs to learn some moderation.”

“Holylight? That’s where Hakuto is. I bet he’s hatching all sorts of schemes again.” Akane laughed.

Mama looked up. “You’re from Holylight? I hear rich nobles run the show there. What were *you* so unhappy about that it made you run off?”

“I didn’t so much run off as come to look for something no one else could do...”

“What no one else could do, huh...? Spoken like somebody who hasn’t struggled a day in their life,” Mama chuckled.

Many young men and women—and perhaps even herself, Mama had to admit—thought themselves special and searched for their own unique purpose. Of course, only a handful of people were truly special. As they ventured out into society, most grew to long for the stability of a normal life. Perhaps that’s what it meant to grow up.

“Akane, was it?” Mama asked. “You’ll learn about the world soon enough. Then maybe something about yourself.”

“Mm... It’s true I don’t know much about the world and all that, but I’ll always be me.”

“Ha! How naive you unspoiled nobles can be...”

“But tell me about you, Mama! What do you do for work? Why are you dressed in all black? Where are we going? Is an Icaros tasty? Is the town we just passed—”

“Stop buzzing, little girl...! Ask one question at a time!” Mama cried in annoyance. Still, she felt a strange urge to tell Akane whatever she wanted to know.

This was thanks to one of Akane’s *special* skills, Secret Agent—a balance-breaking ability that made people want to leak all sorts of details to her. At times, Akane simply stumbled across important information that would benefit her. Back in the game, this ability weakened all stealth skills, greatly helping Akane detect and attack players first.

Naturally, Mama couldn’t help but explain, “People call Icaros the city of evil. It’s the garbage heap of the north.”

“City of evil?! That sounds kind of cool!”

“If you’re not joking, kid, your naivety is starting to get funny. I manage a bunch of *working girls* there. Some of them are drowning in debt, some are there for extra cash. Some girls were practically kidnapped, but there are plenty of noble girls like you, fallen from grace.”

“You run a business in such a dangerous city? Awesome!”

Mama’s brow cinched behind her black veil, seeing how unbothered Akane

was by her job description. She had seen plenty of noble girls who'd never known any troubles nor seen the darkness of the world. Part of her work entailed training those girls from the ground up, preventing them from going mad or becoming suicidal when faced with their new harsh reality. The girls soon learned that, once they fell to Icaros, all that would come from lamenting or fighting their fates were cuts, bruises, and deeper dread of tomorrow.

"You just got caught by one of the faces of that scary city. You understand the situation you're in?"

"It's nice not having to walk! Oh, I don't have anything for cab fare though."

"You're a tough nut to crack..." Mama sighed, seeing Akane as beaming as ever. She was unlike any other girl Mama had come across.

"You seem nice, Mama. I'll go with you to Icaros."

"Don't be silly... It's not a place a girl like you should be anywhere near... Unless you *want* to be a prostitute."

"Nah, I'm a *pure* idol. Girl next door. No couch interviews for me."

"More nonsense again... Pure, huh?" Mama stroked her chin and gazed out of the window. The word seemed distant to her. Shapeless.

Seeing the concern in her face, Akane rushed to say, "Oh, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with girls who do."

"It's a rotten world. A girl's gotta survive somehow."

"I suppose," Akane replied pensively.

Luna, who climbed all the way to the position of Holy Maiden from nothing as an orphan, as well as Yukikaze and Mikan, who earned their way out of poverty by adventuring, were undoubtedly special cases in this world. *Normal* women had to survive by any means necessary.

Akane was familiar with class division, having lived under the Empire's rule, where God's People lived drastically different lives from the rest of the population. As happy-go-lucky as she acted, Akane knew well the dark side of humanity.

Mama chuckled, seeing Akane's smile fade. "Akane, wasn't it...? Don't get it

twisted. *We* take advantage of men, preying on their small, simple minds. Put a man alone in a room with a girl he fancies, and watch him turn into a boy, no matter his birth. It's cute."

Akane's eyes glimmered, showing obvious interest in Mama's claim. "R-Really...? Is it the same with an older guy? Like, like, a forty-five-year-old dandy, stoic type?"

"That's rather specific..."

"I've never really dated, so I want to learn from your decades of experience!"

"Decades?! How old do you think I am?!"

As they continued their conversation, a forerunner of the caravan hurried to the window. "Big Mama, there are countless bodies strewn about on the road ahead."

"How many are we talking?"

"We haven't done a count... But there must be a hundred or so."

"Didn't think there were any potential warzones on our route." The air in the carriage shifted. A handful of bodies would have been one thing, but this number of corpses indicated a large-scale clash.

The knight tensely added, "This road does lead to Icaros. Who would be stupid enough to start a skirmish here?"

"Maybe a sheltered rebel..."

Icaros, true to its moniker of the city of evil, was rife with illegal drugs, human trafficking, bootlegging, arms-dealing, prostitution, deathmatches, dangerous gambling, and any other debauchery imaginable...all in broad daylight. Naturally, many powerful figures from around the continent frequented the city, including those who maintained a saintly image for their own people. Considering that there were also many mercenaries based in the city, one would have been hard-pressed to find anyone willing to start a conflict with Icaros.

The caravan carried on until Mama's carriage came to the devastation the forerunner had reported. She silently surveyed the site for some time, before

quietly calling to the knights on guard, “Stay here.”

“Y-You mustn’t go alone, Big Mama!”

Mama waved the knights away and walked into the field of corpses, followed by Akane.

“You stay in the carriage too, girl.”

“No way Superstar Akane, private eye, is going to pass up on a crime scene!” Akane puffed her chest, holding up a magnifying glass.

“It’s all fun and games to you, isn’t it...? Don’t get sick from seeing the dead.” Mama seemed to have given up talking sense into Akane. “Doesn’t look like any human did this, though...” Mama muttered, inspecting the bodies, all sliced up and down through their armor.

Akane, too, could see how powerful the killer must have been. She whistled a tune and concluded it with, “I’m not loving it...”

“What are you doing?” Mama asked while Akane continued to sniff for something in the air.

They both heard a faint grunt and turned to find a beautiful lady knight on the verge of death. She was about as tall as the other knights, with luscious golden locks. In another life, she might have seen success as a fashion model.

Mama approached the knight and remarked, “They call you a monster on the battlefield... What did this?”

“I wish you hadn’t seen me like this. It was a devil with a large scythe...”

“I see... Do you have any last words?”

A fatally deep gash ran from the knight’s shoulder down to her side, and she was missing her left leg from the knee down. As far as Akane could tell, she was as good as dead, only hanging on by a thread. No item or skill—maybe not even Yu’s—could have saved her.

“Tell my comrades...it took *Entre l’x’am*...”

“That’s why you’re missing your armor...”

The gears in Akane’s head turned as she listened in on the conversation. The

faint scent, the devil with the scythe, the bizarrely named armor... All of the pieces were coming together.

“Eureka!” Akane cried. “Isn’t this the armor you’re talking about? Or something super similar?” She produced the armor Belphegor had been wearing from her Backup Backpack.

The knight and Mama stared in astonishment; it was nearly identical to the armor in question, save for its color.

“This one’s called Final Exam,” Akane added. “Yours must be Entrance Exam, huh?”

“Amazing... There were two iterations of *Entre Ix’am*,” the knight muttered, curling her lips. While she didn’t quite understand what Akane was talking about, she was clearly amused. “Heh... That devil...can suck it...”

“If you’re talking about the stupid-looking devil with the pumpkin, I’m going to kill him. Promise. Sweet dreams.” Akane gently stroked the knight’s cheek. In this gesture of kindness glimmered Akane’s cold grasp on life and death.

“Funny girl, you are. Take this... I have some money... Take care of it, will you, Mama?” The knight tore off from her neck what looked like a dog tag, enchanted it, and handed it to Akane. Then she closed her eyes, embracing death without a trace of remorse on her face.

“Another one gone... The world isn’t fair, is it?”

“Did you know each other, Mama?”

“She was a mercenary. Lived a man’s life, always wearing that full set of armor. Said that was the only way to get respect in the business. Tons of girls like her in Icaros.”

“Gotcha...” Akane held up the dog tag, shining with fresh blood. In fear of their bodies being damaged beyond recognition in battle, many knights and mercenaries chose to wear a dog tag, a representation of their humble wish to be known as who they were when their bodies were put to rest. “Mama, this dog tag is lit up.”



“A sign she left her estate to you... All those mercenaries think about what happens after their death so they’ll be ready to go when the time comes.” Mama closed her eyes in a short prayer. When she opened them, she simply commanded one of her knights to bury the body and started to leave as if nothing had happened.

“Hmph. Let’s go. You have the right to her estate now.”

“Huh? I don’t need anything like that.”

“Those were her last words. You’re not going to ignore this.” Big Mama gave Akane a spine-chilling glare that pressured even her to agree.

“There’s not much I’ve figured out about you, Akane, but there is one thing.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” Akane asked, rather disgruntled that she let this bizarre woman in black instill a second of fear in her. Perhaps a product of her life experience, rather than raw strength.

“You’re unbelievably lucky. Starting with me finding you.”

“I’m Lady Luck incarnate. If anything, *you’re* on a lucky streak, Mama.”

“Let’s see how long you can keep it up,” Mama scoffed and returned to the carriage.

Chasing after her, Akane gave the dog tag a second look...and found on it two inscriptions.

The Pewter Moon

——The Holy Castle, Holylight.

White the Holy Maiden and the Demon Lord (dressed as a fallen angel) walked down a deserted hall of the Holy Castle. As the Demon Lord remained concealed in his Stealth Stance to avoid any unwanted ruckus, White would have appeared to be walking alone, had any onlookers happened to see.

Why were the two of them, who had been standing on the rooftop of the newly built Casino in Rabbi, now walking through the Holy Castle?

It all started when the Demon Lord told White, “I would like to be shown to your room, Holy Maiden White.”

“What...?”

“Your quarters must be in the Holy Castle.”

“Y-You mean my b-b-b-b-b-bedchambers?!”

Thus, White led the way with her face flushed red while the Demon Lord remained oblivious.

“Wh-What business will you have in my bedchambers, Lord Lucifer...?”

“It may come as a surprise to you. Be sure not to make any loud noises.”

White trembled at this. Her imagination was in chaos at this answer.

Soon, they were standing outside of White’s room, where she deeply inhaled, bracing herself. “Th-These are my private quarters,” she said.

“Mm. I don’t want anyone to see us. Let’s get inside.”

“Y-Yes...!”

Through the door, they entered a well-organized room. Reflecting her personality, White’s room was more like a practical office than the bedroom of

a young woman.

The Demon Lord gave the place a quick look and touched his chin. “A clean, organized room. One can’t concentrate among clutter, after all.”

“D-Do you think so...?” White felt like she was losing her mind. Her impulsive embrace from a few moments ago still haunted her. She never would have expected things to escalate so quickly and felt dizzy as she closed her eyes, imagining what was to come this night.

C-Could it be that Lord Lucifer wants to...?! White could nearly scream in a turbulent mix of glee and embarrassment. When she opened her eyes again, the Demon Lord was taking some sort of scroll from his jacket, keeping his back to White.

“Now, try not to be surprised, White,” he said.

“I-I’ll try!”

White wondered if the scroll had to do with the act they were about to perform and whether or not things had been done differently in the Old Ages. Much to her surprise, however, the Demon Lord produced a giant, pewter slime from the scroll. For whatever reason, the slime was covering a large mirror, which made it look rather suggestive.

Noooo! White silently screamed. Is he going to use THAT in bed...?!

“You’re a bit big. Can’t you get any smaller?” the Demon Lord asked, and the pewter slime responded by molding part of itself into a hand that formed an OK sign. In seconds, it shrunk to the size of a vanity mirror. “That will do. Can you connect this place with the village of Rabbi?”

In response to the Demon Lord, a line of text appeared on the mirror: *Please confirm. Jump to the village of Rabbi. Stamina Cost, 10. YES/NO.*

“Inhabitants of this world have less Stamina than us. Can you set it to zero?”

Setting changed at Creator’s request. Stamina Cost, 0.

“Not bad! You’re pretty user-friendly.”

The slime shaped part of itself into a hand once more and humbly scratched its head (the top of its body, at least).

White was frozen and speechless, wondering if she had wildly misunderstood the Demon Lord's intention. "L-Lord Lucifer...? What is that slime?"

"Something I found the other day. It's harmless."

White turned her attention to it. While it looked like a monster, it seemed to be of a different nature. No monster would have been unaffected by the magic that protected the castle: it would have burned to a crisp from the ambient Light and Holy energy.

"This can teleport us like Quick Travel can... It'll instantly connect us, no matter the distance."

"This slime can perform the Leap of the Ember Angel...?"

"Something like that," the Demon Lord concluded haphazardly, content to let White interpret this thing however she might. "As I've explained, our village is going to grow immensely. That will affect our surroundings, for better or worse."

"I-I agree... But what does the slime have to do with that?"

"It means that I welcome a visit and inspection from you any time you please." He had not forgotten how White had once seen him as a dangerous threat. The last thing he wanted was for the ruler of this nation to see him as an enemy. "Let me reiterate that our progress will lead to the expansion of your power and the solidification of the country's foundation."

The Holy Church's influence was on the decline, and the Holy Maidens had been mere mascots for some time. The outer reaches of Holylight in all four directions were ruled by isolated forces, its center fought over by various factions. Now the Demon Lord was offering the village to White. If this had been anyone else, she would have thought long and hard about it, maybe even refusing the offer altogether. *Lord Lucifer's strength is unmistakable*, she thought. *He's full of miracles, just as they are told of in myths*. After seeing the power of the Ruler of Night in action, White didn't even consider turning the Demon Lord down. After being gifted the Angel's Ring and experiencing the Demon Lord confiding in her, one could only imagine how she felt about him. At this point, White would sooner take on the entire world than turn her back on Lucifer the Fallen Angel.

“No matter what happens, from here on out...I will always be your ally,” White said with determination.

“Mm...” The Demon Lord was slightly taken aback. He had introduced this deal to simply assure White she wouldn’t be getting the short end of the stick. Now it sounded like White’s mind was on something else. “Anyway, if you have any concerns, please come visit the village. I’ve seen huge projects collapse from a lack of communication and trust.” Spoken from Akira Ono’s own experience. “I’ll be going. Flag down Tahara whenever you want to leave the village after visiting.”

“I-I will...!”

The Demon Lord stood before the slime-mirror and disappeared. White stood there for some time, as if she was hurt by such an unceremonious parting. She then hurried over to the mirror where the Demon Lord had been standing and was immediately sucked into it. She found herself standing at the entrance of the village of Rabbi.

The Demon Lord turned to find her behind him, staring with, naturally, a confused look on his face.

“I-I’m sorry...! I thought I’d...drop by. Hee hee.”

“Hee hee,” my ass! I didn’t mean to show up the very next second!

Once again, the Demon Lord escorted White back to the Holy Castle.

As the two continued their fruitless banter, another conflict was unfolding back at the Hot Springs Resort.

The resort had been rented out completely to the Madam; an unusual move for her to make, considering she was the most zealous advocate for this place she considered to be every woman’s paradise. She sat on a stack of flat rocks in the stargazing bath, watching the moon gleam in the night sky.

“I never thought I would know a night as peaceful as this...” She tilted back the glass in her hand, sipping on the top-shelf wine within. In this moment, the moon paled in comparison to her beauty, her form filled with formidable grace.

A familiar inhuman voice rang in her ear. “You think you’ve won? As foolish as

ever, woman,” the voice spoke with much venom, almost violent.

“Oh, you won’t be crying in pain tonight, little boy?” the Madam retorted.

Frustrated by her remark, black particles gathered in the air before her until they formed a devil: an Ancient Devil that had once cursed House Butterfly. “I *have* a name, and a perfectly beautiful one at that: Rhyme Mary.” The devil brushed back his hair, gazing down at the Madam. In fact, he looked like a flawlessly beautiful boy, albeit somewhat androgynous. His long hair shone silver as if it refracted the moonlight, his eyes glimmering a bejeweled blue. Any other woman on the continent might have been enchanted with just a glance at him.



“Now you decide to introduce yourself? Where are your manners?” The Madam tilted her glass back once more, speaking with unwavering confidence. “I’ve been worried. I was starting to miss your cute little cries,” the Madam said with false concern, more devilish than the devil before her.

In truth, the devil’s voice in her mind had completely ceased after she made peace with Harts, which made the Madam certain that the end was near. By now, she had slimmed down every last part of her body, without a shred of excess fat left on her frame. This was beyond any realistic transformation; it was as if her DNA itself had been modified.

“Don’t get it twisted. I can kill you anytime I want.”

“So pathetic when you make empty threats...”

The devil gritted his teeth. Rhyme Mary barely had enough strength left to maintain his existence, let alone kill the Madam.

“You talk just like the first.”

“The first? Of my family, you mean?”

“I couldn’t stand that woman...! How could she, a mere human, reject my proposal?! And marry some run-of-the-mill guy you could find anywhere!” Rhyme Mary shouted as his frustrations boiled over.

The Madam finally lowered her eyes to meet the devil’s, her gaze alight with supernatural sensuality. “My dear ancestor was a smart woman.”

“Silence! She was the most foolish woman to ever walk the continent! Choosing *that* over me, the most beautiful, powerful being...!”

“So you decided to punish her for *her* arrogance... A perfect summary of your character,” the Madam snickered, further irritating the devil.

Had the very devil that haunted her clan materialized before her sooner, the old Madam might have lost it, shouting every insult that came to mind. The new Madam, however, knew that the battle was already won and even showed some pity for the loser.

“Says the woman who cried *rivers* over my curse.”

“You’ve cursed and cursed, on and on, just because a woman once turned you down... And here you are now. How does it feel?”

The devil’s expression twisted, ashamed of where he had ended up. “I was more powerful...and beautiful than anybody. How could that human, with nothing exceptional about him...” The devil sulked, lowering his head, sensing his inevitable end. As all Ancient Devils did, he possessed incredible strength and magic, and Rhyme Mary had grand wealth and unparalleled beauty to boot. After holding the world in the palms of his hands, one heartbreak had uprooted his entire life.

“I don’t know much about my dear ancestor. It’s been over a thousand years, after all.” Any records from that era were oral traditions or rumors that had been diluted by time. Tales of House Butterfly, now one of the wealthiest families on the continent, were no exception. The Madam only knew of one brief legend regarding the ancestor in question. “I’m told that ‘guy’ tried farming in the devil-tainted southlands to no avail, so he was forced to pioneer the rugged mountains with some others in the same predicament.” This was an old piece of history and a story commonly told in the Butterfly family. Her ancestor and her beau were driven to the harsh mountains where their comrades fell to illness, succumbed to thirst and madness, or starved to death left and right.

“Exactly. She wouldn’t have suffered meaninglessly if she had chosen me.” The devil had tried to seduce the first Butterfly on countless occasions, offering water, food, wealth...even to reverse the state of the polluted flatlands. By this time, the Madam’s ancestor was much worse for wear, grimy from the inability to bathe, with matted hair and sunken cheeks. Even still, she was tempted by the devil’s whispers, but steadfastly stood by her man’s side. Then, perhaps by the blessing or pity of an angel...

“A butterfly appeared before her,” the Madam laughed, amused. This was told as a bedtime story in the Butterfly family, and seeing the devil’s reaction, it didn’t seem entirely fictional. The first Butterfly and her man followed the butterfly deep into the mountains where they found a trove of Earth Spell Stones that could revitalize their land. Overjoyed, their team descended the

mountain and decided to *retry* their luck at the once soiled earth. Their days were still tough, but rumor spread about their settlement. As years passed, the land was reborn, even forming rivers. The desolate mountains were streaked with creeks and springs, and the southern flatlands sprouted luscious vegetation as far as the eye could see... An old legend retold in southern Holylight and the origin of house Butterfly.

“I usually like things big and flashy, but I don’t mind this rustic story.”

No matter their size, every noble house carried a grand tale of bravery to tell of their origin (some more realistic than others), and house Butterfly’s was quite unexciting by those standards. Still, the Madam had a soft spot for this tale as she couldn’t help but sympathize with her ancestor, having fought the solitary battle against her curse, just as her ancestor had labored against her fate.

The devil had listened to the Madam with his head hung low and now shook his head in denial. “Foolish... Foolish woman. She would have never had to go through that if she had come to me.”

“Come, now... Don’t you get it?”

“Don’t I get what?”

“You weren’t enough of a man for my ancestor to seek help from.” The Madam’s comment nearly caused the devil to boil over with rage, but she continued as she poured more wine into her glass, “Just look at the southern flatlands now. Full of grass, flowers, and bountiful fields. The Earth Spell Stones from those mines have improved the lives of so many people.”

“What are you getting at...?”

“The result was the same, with or without you. No one needed you. You aren’t enough of a man to even matter. Do you understand now?” The Madam delivered the final blow and the devil shook in humiliation. At the end of the day, the story described a woman who caught herself a man worthy of her attention and struck massive wealth for her family in a single generation. Any who heard it could see the man’s character, which made Rhyme Mary’s shrivel in comparison.

“Ha ha, aha ha ha ha!” Rhyme Mary burst into laughter. “You’re absolutely right! That plain old human always made her smile, made her blind to me and my powers... Made her ‘happy!’”

He could never forget that fact, so he turned himself into a powerful, everlasting curse upon House Butterfly so that none born into it would ever be beautiful. Such a powerful curse was no match for Akira Ono’s world, an absolute force that even an Ancient Devil stood no chance against.

“Poor thing... You didn’t want your heart to be stolen again,” the Madam said.

Rhyme Mary must have subconsciously feared the day when his heart would be broken again by a Butterfly, choosing to thwart that possibility from the start.

“It’s not funny. You’re just as perceptive as she was.”

“I think I’m giving her a run for her money when it comes to catching men.”

“Ha...! Butterflies do go for ridiculous men, don’t they?” The devil began to fade back into black particles, a relenting smile on his face.

“One last question for you. Who’s more beautiful: me or my ancestor?”

“Don’t get too cocky. You’ve got a long way to go before you’re in her league.”

“That’s a pretty good goal.”

“Ha ha ha! After all these years...I never once had the upper hand against her...” Rhyme Mary vanished into black dust, carried by the wind up towards the shining moon.

His last and bizarre words lingered in her ears: “I am Rhyme Mary. Proud descendant, may you be victor of this cruel Game.”

The Madam noticed a black coin left in her hand. While it gave off an obviously devilish aura, she felt no aversion to it. She held it up to the moon and found an engraving of a butterfly, spreading its wings in victory.

“You showed a glimpse of being a real man in the end.” The Madam kissed the coin in her hand.

This ancient torment had reached its conclusion, and the curse of House Butterfly was broken. Of course, the curse also affected the Madam's sister, and the disappearance of it would lead to yet another incident... But the Demon Lord knew nothing about all of this.

Another Day at the Office

The Demon Lord and Aku were stretching on the side of the pool, nestled in a corner of Rabbi. He had already deactivated his Fallen Angel mode and reverted back to his usual appearance, except he was wearing knee-length lifeguard shorts. Aku wore a swimsuit that resembled the uniform swimwear issued at Japanese elementary schools.

“We have to properly stretch before getting in.”

“O-Okay!” Aku stared at the pool, which was filled to the brim with water, as she mimicked the Demon Lord’s movements as he stretched his limbs and joints.

“Master Demon Lord... Are we r-really going in there?”

“It might take time getting used to it, but it’s just like a big bath. You have to start these things young. You never know when you might be lost at sea,” the Demon Lord remarked, as tone deaf as ever.

Aku, of course, had never been concerned about her swimming ability. “It feels like...such a waste.”

Water was precious to the inhabitants of this world. The idea of doing nothing with so much of it—not cooking, cleaning, or even watering crops—was almost blasphemous.

“There’s nothing better on a hot day than a dip in the pool.”

“Ar-Are you sure I should take part in such...luxury?”

Luxury indeed. There was no productivity to be had in using water for fleeting leisure. At its core, luxury was wasteful.

“M-Master Demon Lord! Why don’t we use this to water the farms or—”

“Cannonball!”

“Wait!”

The Demon Lord hoisted Aku up and dove straight into the pool, plunging below the surface.

“Pfft! Y-You scared me, Master Demon Lord!”

“Ha ha ha! Doesn’t it feel great?!”

Below the scorching sun stood this oasis of rocking water and cool breeze. The place imparted a bizarre elation onto its guests, urging swimmers of all ages to play and scream like children.

“I’ll hold your hands. Slowly lift your legs.”

“L-Like this...? Pft!”

“Ha ha ha! Relax. Just let them float to the surface.” The Demon Lord led Aku by her hands and slowly walked back through the pool.

Aku obeyed, letting herself float as if she was gliding across the surface. “I-I’m floating...!”

“You’re about ten times lighter in water. I used to swim in public baths like this too,” the Demon Lord laughed. As soon as he reached the edge of the pool, he quickly turned Aku around. “Let’s start with kicks. Move your legs up and down. Smack the water.”

“Like th-this?”

“Mhm. Use the tops of your feet to push water behind you.”

“Push...water...behind me...!”

“Oh? You’re getting the hang of it! You’ll learn to swim in no time.”

“Really?!”

Continuing to lead her by the hands, praising her more than needed at times, the Demon Lord taught her how to swim. Aku was a quick learner, thanks to her receptive demeanor.

“Let’s put floaties on you just in case and move on to using a kickboard.”

The Demon Lord sat Aku at the side of the pool and ventured into the shed,

returning with all sorts of swimming gear: floaties, a kickboard, swim goggles, snorkel fins, inflatables, *etc.*

“We can play all day with these,” the Demon Lord beamed, equipping Aku with the floaties and himself with goggles.

The pool had been modeled after a typical public school’s, with a hint of yesteryear in the eye washing stations, a shaded bench area, and changing rooms. So meticulous was his design that cicadas could even be heard from the trees surrounding the pool.

“All day...? What about your work, Master Demon Lord?”

Since the Demon Lord’s return, the village of Rabbi had become even more flooded with people and goods, making every day a chaotic mess of logistics. There might have been a riot if those hard at work had heard the Demon Lord (who was supposed to be at the center of the operation) planning to play the day away.

“Aku. A good boss trusts their people and their decisions. Micromanaging is the telltale sign of ineptitude.”

“O-Okay...”

“At the end of the day, all a boss has to do is take responsibility when things go south.” The Demon Lord proudly declared that he was skipping work for the day. Of course, if anything happened that was beyond Tahara’s scope of abilities, there was nothing the Demon Lord could even do about it. No work and no responsibility... In short, he was a bum.

“Even when we’re playing, you think about so many things!” Aku said.

“Mm... Indeed...”

“Even all the drinking you’ve been doing since coming back—”

“Let’s get back into the pool! There’s still much to learn!” The Demon Lord dashed from Aku into the pool, and she followed, swinging her floatie-equipped arms. “Now, we’ll start with flutter kicks, breaststroke, then move to front crawl and butterfly.”

“Butterfly... Does it have something to do with the Madam?”

“No, no, no. That’d be freaky.”

Then, Aku began copying the Demon Lord’s moves, and after nearly an hour, she could float without the aid of his tools and propel herself with a swimming style of her own discovery: doggy paddle.

“Look, Master Demon Lord! Swimming like this keeps your head dry!”

“Ha ha ha! That’s called the doggy paddle.”

“What?! Doggy— Can Spot swim too?!”

As noon approached, food stands throughout the village were hard at work preparing for the lunch rush, but the area remained distinctly peaceful.

“Shall we rest for a while?” the Demon Lord asked, pulling an inflatable couch into the pool; it featured a full back, armrests, and even a drink holder. The Demon Lord jumped onto the couch and produced a can of beer from the Item Folder, something he had procured from the casino’s walk-in fridge. “There’s another one there, Aku. Why don’t you relax?”

“I want to share with you, Master Demon Lord!”

“Wha... Well, it’s large enough for both of us...”

As the Demon Lord continued talking, Aku monkeyed onto the float and reclined against him, completing the picture of a father and daughter’s Sunday outing.

“It’s so strange that we’re sitting on top of water!”

To escape the incriminating thought of *the registry* as he shared a pool float with a little girl wearing a school-issued swimsuit, the Demon Lord rushed to take out a juice box from the Item Folder.

“Here, have some...orange juice, Aku.”

“Thank you!”

The casino’s juice repertoire (of which the Demon Lord had nabbed several of each variety) was overly extensive, many of them foreign in this world where sweetness, too, was a luxury.

“Let’s drink.”

“Okay... Master Demon Lord! This is so sweet!”

“Good.” The Demon Lord couldn’t help but reminisce of his past at the light of Aku’s brimming smile.

A thirteen-year-old girl smiling, drinking juice, and playing at a pool was nothing out of the ordinary. He was sure he had lived similarly carefree days when he was her age.

But she never had. She lived all her life alone, without any family...

Aku had worked herself to the bone only to become the pariah of her village, ultimately being offered up as a sacrifice. Her upbringing had been marred by unspeakable cruelty, having lost her parents and been left with no one to so much as show her pity. She could have very well chosen death over that life devoid of hope.

I don’t know what kind of person she’ll grow up to be... But I have to protect her until then. With a can of beer in one hand, the Demon Lord reached for Aku’s head with the other. A certain resolve hardened within his heart.

“Master Demon Lord...?”

“***”

“Wha— What are you saying...?” Aku asked, confused.

The Demon Lord just wanted to use that line, apparently. “Beautiful weather today.”

The sky above was spotless, the sun claiming a monopoly on the heavens. The dry air, the warm breeze, and even the mirage in the distance seemed insistent on creating the scene of a blazing summer.

Lounging in a pool, huh...? How long has it been...?

The Demon Lord tried to recall his grade school days, but a memory from a different time sprung to his mind: his adult self in the pool, his suit, shirt, and tie sprawled on the poolside.

Wait, wait, wait! What is this memory...? I never went into the school pool at night!

Another figure was sharing the pool with him: a woman of small stature who still wore a white blouse and seemed to be fully clothed soaking in the pool.

Who is that...? She doesn't look Japanese...

Her blonde hair was tied into pigtails, but her face was scribbled out as if by a black marker, preventing the Demon Lord from recognizing her.

Who the hell... I was at my school at night? That's trespassing...!

The Demon Lord hurried to scrub the image from his mind and gazed up at the sky. The same, cloudless blue now evoked an inexplicable sadness within him. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"I-It's nice... That it doesn't rain in this country," the Demon Lord said, trying to force the memory out of his mind.

Aku asked, "Do you not like rain, Master Demon Lord?"

"I don't. If I had my way, it would never rain again."

"P-People need some rain, I think..."

"No. We can set up wells all around the country. No rain, no problem. I'll have work cut out for that bandit too." While the Demon Lord's sentiment was extreme, the fact remained that something which could generate infinite water was no small matter.

"Does the rain make you think of something sad, Master Demon Lord?"

"No, there's no special reason. I just don't like it."

Aku could tell the Demon Lord was lying but wisely decided not to pursue the matter any further.

As if to change the subject, the Demon Lord produced a bottle of non-alcoholic champagne (although there was no drinking age in this world) and poured Aku a glass.

"Some faux champagne. Let's enjoy our day off."

Aku also picked up on the Demon Lord brazenly calling this a 'day off,' but decided not to mention it. She was probably thinking more maturely than the Demon Lord at this point.

The two were alone in the pool, where the cicadas' chorus evoked a distant summer memory. At times, a gentle breeze came, rocking the pool float slightly. The Demon Lord reminisced on his days in this world and threw back his can of beer.

"There's something...I want to ask you, Master Demon Lord."

"Hm?"

Aku really wanted to ask more about what the Demon Lord thought of rain, but decided to go with a different question, trying to ask him as much as she could before he left again. "Master Demon Lord... Are you going to become the king of this country?"

"Nothing like that. I'm not interested."

"B-But, there are so many rumors—"

"Rumors are rumors. My advisors might have their own ideas..."

The Demon Lord considered once again how his advisors thought and acted of their own accord. While their conduct was largely in accordance with the backstories he had given them, some of them were already deviating, making it difficult for the Demon Lord to predict their actions.

"I feel like you're going to go far away, Master Demon Lord... You're becoming more and more important to all these people."

"Don't worry about that."

Aku turned around and met the Demon Lord's eyes. "Then...tell me you'll always be with me." Her red and blue eyes stared at him above the shimmering water.

Always? I can't make an empty promise when I don't even know what I'm doing tomorrow...

Defeated by the mystical shine of her eyes, the Demon Lord turned to the sky. What else could he have done after a girl in a school-issued swimsuit asked him that in their own pool with no sounds around but the cicadas?

"I'll think about it..."

“No! Think about it now.”

“After consideration, I have no reservations telling you I’ll think about it, but I think I’ll consider it further upon further consideration and thought...”

“Master Demon Lord, don’t try to confuse me!”

The Demon Lord continued to verbally weasel around like a politician to try and get through this discussion without making a promise; he wouldn’t dare make a promise lightly when he was basically stumbling through the dark day to day.

Try as the Demon Lord did to escape his day’s work, the issue would not resolve itself. He had purposefully avoided a meeting with delegates from foreign countries. After the Invasion in Rookie and the catastrophic battle in the capital of Suneo, messengers from both countries had come to Rabbi while dealing with their respective aftermaths.

If it had been unimpeded, the Invasion would have wrought havoc through other regions of Edogawa, and Suneo’s capital would have collapsed if it wasn’t for the Demon Lord. Despite saving each country from said danger, he hadn’t made any contact with them whatsoever, let alone demanded a reward. The representatives of Edogawa and Suneo found the Demon Lord’s attitude and eerie silence unnerving. They felt pressured into finally paying a visit.

If one could call this diplomacy, both countries were already at a severe disadvantage. The messengers happened to run into each other on their way to the village of Rabbi and jumped at the opportunity to discuss what the infamous Demon Lord could possibly ask from them.

“Minister of Suneo... What do you expect him to demand of us?”

“If nothing else... An appropriate amount of cash, I’m sure.”

“An appropriate amount...? There’s never been a precedent for this sort of thing.”

Leaving without saying a word after saving entire nations from devastation might have been a heroic trait in movies, but in reality, it was only natural that politics came into play.

“Worst case scenario, he may demand the entire estimated cost of restoration had he not been there,” the Minister suggested.

The messenger of Edogawa nearly leapt at this. It wasn’t realistic (or, frankly, possible at all) to pay for the restoration of the entire capital.

“Minister. Perhaps we need to have a heart to heart...”

“I concur. Ours are neighboring countries, bonded with many years of friendship. Let us join forces to mitigate his demands as much as possible.”

Fortunately for both of them, the delegates were businessmen in their own right. Suneo’s went without saying, but the Edogawa delegate was a leader of a grand trading company, the president of which currently ruled the country. They were much better fit to join forces in this kind of situation than nobles who might have been hung up on status and titles.

“First and foremost, we never *requested* his help in the matter...”

“Yes, that we cannot stress enough.”

“He acted solely of his own accord on both accounts... If we can establish that...”

“We must, if we want to keep his demands anywhere near reasonable.”

The delegates continued to discuss strategy, ready to be as opportunistic as their tricky situations allowed. However, their strategies and spirits would be blown to the wind when they beheld the Golden Temple materializing beyond the sandstorm.

——Hot Springs Resort, Office.

The minister of Suneo stood in the office, feeling like his head was under a guillotine. His hands quivered and his face was pale, betraying his title.

This village is nothing like the reports... What’s happened here?!

Suneo, by nature, was a nation privy to more international intel than most. They had even kept tabs on the village of Rabbi, which no one else would have bothered to do, given it was a desolate village full of demi-humans. However, the spies of Suneo had only been gathering intel on the village (and Holylight at

large) after noticing the Madam's movements and her new relationship with the Holy Maiden Luna, assuming that the Madam was attempting to seize more power.

Our assessments were accurate... Otherwise, Suneo would not have snagged an enormous profit off of their foresight of the Madam's caravan's northern expedition. Even now, they were preparing for a large-scale civil conflict within Holylight after seeing the central and military nobles join hands.

In Suneo, information was at times more valuable than gold. Their proud web of espionage, however, had been rendered useless in the face of the Demon Lord's ambitious terraforming of the village. Now there was a forest and spring that never existed before, even a bizarre temple. No mortal could have explained all of this.

What is that giant temple for...? How is there a spring in a land such as this...? The minister's head was spinning, overwhelmed with impossible information, only worsened by the masterpiece paintings and famous art pieces that lined the office.

"Sorry for the late arrival," Tahara greeted through the cigarette in his mouth as he entered. "Name's Tahara. Nice to meet ya."

Tahara's tone, physique, and perfect movement had the minister totally on guard again. As a seasoned trader, his instincts told him that he could not afford a single mistake when dealing with this man.

"Go ahead and take a seat," Tahara carried on. "Let's toast before we get into the boring stuff, yeah?"

"I-I appreciate the gesture, but..."

"Oh? I brought a couple of bottles because I'd heard you know your stuff." Tahara produced numerous drink bottles from the Backup Backpack, in addition to glassware and a bucket full of ice. "None of these were easy to procure, mind you. Guess you *do* know your stuff if you're hesitant to partake." He smiled at the minister and began filling a glass with ice cubes from the bucket using a pair of tongs.

The bottles on the table were among the minister's favorites, and there was

even one that he didn't dare treat himself to more than once a year.

He's researched me... How much does he know?!

Still smiling, Tahara reached for that very bottle, passing over the rest. The minister felt like Tahara had grabbed hold of his heart rather than the bottleneck.

Tahara waved to the seat once more. "Take a seat, won't you? Let's toast to our aid now that we've made it through that battle. What do you say?" Somehow, the questions seemed like threats to the minister.

During said battle, the ones that moved to quell the disaster were from Holylight: the Demon Lord, Tahara, Luna, Harts... Meanwhile, those from Suneo, the minister chief among them, had run off to the castle and never so much as took a step outside. The minister could barely meet Tahara's gaze after being reminded that they had both been involved that day.

"Wh-What a terrible inconvenience we've caused. Our army, well, it needed time to prepare..."

"Don't sweat it. The world's full of the unexpected. My boss is wicked smart too, so lots of headaches on my end." Tahara's friendly grin almost made the minister relax. At this point, it would have been insulting for the minister not to accept. Sitting on the edge of the extravagant sofa, the minister took the glass and hardened his resolve.

"Mister Tahara, if we could discuss—"

"Gotta toast before that stuff. I'm getting some booze in before sundown, thanks to you." With a hearty chuckle, Tahara lifted his glass and the minister followed suit, pouring a small amount into his mouth, but it didn't taste like much. The minister could hardly see straight, overwhelmed with worry over what he feared was bound to be an unreasonable demand.

"Now, Mister Tahara. Let's discuss—"

"Hey, Minister. You interested in branching into our village?"

"Huh?"

"Y'know, build a *branch* of your shop here? Some nobles' wives would love

your stuff. We just want to stock the shelves with what the customers want, y'know?"

"Wh— One moment... I was ready to discuss the aftermath—"

"Forget that. This is the important topic at hand. What do you say?"

The minister looked nonplussed. At face value, it was an attractive offer to extend their business into the village when major trading companies all over the nation were in cutthroat competition to expand their business into any foreign territory. Exorbitant bribes and donations, if not terrible bloodshed, lurked behind the scenes of these foreign expansions. *Inviting* a foreign trader into one's nation without a deal under the table was unthinkable.

"I don't understand your meaning at all... What would your country have to gain from doing so? With enough of our luxury items in circulation, high-end traders of Holylight will be put out of business," the minister pressed.

Traders of Suneo handled a great variety of merchandise. In addition to the basics like textiles and jewelry, they offered perfume, lip rouge, silverware, furniture, mirrors, horse riding gear, and more. Nobles and wealthy traders would clamor to boost their status by covering themselves in Suneo imports from head to toe, even serving their party guests using Suneo dishware.

"What do we have to gain...? If you're in our village, we can easily buy your stuff without having to make dangerous, long trips. That's pretty big, don't you think?"

"I mean to say, traders of your own country will push back... Their territory..." The minister trailed off, feeling ridiculous. Why did he have to concern himself about this man's business? Tahara would be the one on the end of said pushback, not the minister.

"It's dog-eat-dog in the business world. The best products survive and the crappy ones die out. If they can't compete with your brands, that's their problem."

"Such high praise," the minister managed to say, despite the urge to roll his eyes. Survival of the fittest was fine and dandy, but he couldn't fathom hurting domestic businesses over that philosophy.

“With your branch in the village, customer satisfaction is only going to go up.”

Customer satisfaction...? The minister shook at the phrase Tahara had dropped. Customer satisfaction was the very core of Suneo. In pursuit of the highest-quality goods, brands of Suneo spent an astonishing amount of money and effort on each and every product, only putting the best of the best onto the market; naturally, each product that earned their seal of approval was both rare and highly sought after. This business philosophy did suffer from cheap, abundant competition as well as the inability to capitalize on trends early.

Customer satisfaction above all. Never stop progressing... Mantras repeated by the kings of Suneo reverberated in the minister’s mind, making him consider the matter. Perhaps Tahara had a reason to back up his survival-of-the-fittest business policy.

Unbeknownst to the minister, Tahara had already begun putting this philosophy in action on a smaller scale with the intention of applying it throughout the continent. The world was rife with sleazy contractors, corner-cutting carpenters, grocers that sold damaged produce, and the like. Tahara wanted to eliminate those businesses one at a time while constructing a system where they couldn’t survive.

“A branch may not be viable, depending on the tax rates...” the minister said after some thought. International commerce was taxed in this world too, at a rather high rate. The exact tax rate varied by country, but imports from Suneo were often taxed at exorbitant rates due to high demand.

“None of that crap, commerce taxes and whatnot. Just give us a tenth of your revenue. You folks have your own bracket.”

“Tenth...? Do you jest?”

“No point in setting a high rate if it makes you hold back your best stuff.”

“Well, we... I suppose...”

Ten percent was an unbelievably generous tax rate for a shop in a foreign country. The minister nearly let slip a grin at the prospect of the wealth that would be coming his way, assuming this too-good-to-be-true deal was, indeed, a real deal.

“That’s what I *would* say, if someone wasn’t looking to start a fight with us soon.”

The minister’s urge to smile had vanished entirely. He knew full well who that *someone* was: the central nobles, ready to start a civil clash that would split Holylight in two.

“If we win, the deal goes through, but if we don’t, we’re just counting unhatched chickens.”

“Indeed...”

“The nobles will never approve of your branch, will they? They’ve got their own friends.”

“I’m sure... They have long-standing relationships with traders and merchants.”

Naturally, the nobles would protect the traders that made major donations and the perks that came with those relationships. There was no reason for them to allow any new business to emerge, let alone a foreign one moving in.

“We, on the other hand, aren’t tied up. We wouldn’t mind seeing a branch of yours in central, southern, or, heck, smack-dab in the middle of noble territory.”

“That would be a bold decision, indeed...” the minister carefully answered, fearing the demand that was surely to come next. What could Tahara possibly ask in exchange for such an attractive offer, especially when Suneo already owed them for the preservation of their capital?

“Can’t give you all of that for free, though... I want you guys to come up with a million gold medallions.”

“M-Million?! That’s far too...”

One gold medallion equated to about 20,000 USD. Tahara’s demand was for an astronomical 20 billion dollars.

“Don’t worry, I’m not asking you to fork over the million. We’re not short on cash, if you haven’t guessed from the room.”

“Y-You want us to prepare money for show?”

“Glad you’re catching on. Bet you know why too.”

“To spread the word that...you have our financial backing,” the minister squeezed out as he began to feel faint. Before he knew it, he was neck-deep in Holylight’s civil conflict.

“I won’t take a single bronze coin from you in reality. You just have to flash that cash to the right people at the right time. Piece of cake, right?”

The minister gulped loudly and nodded, terrified that, if he refused, Tahara might have just demanded the million gold medallions.

“It should prove a useful card to cut down opposition.” The minister gave an inquisitive look, but Tahara simply grinned and held out a cigarette to him.

The minister activated Angel’s Spoon but saw no sign of poison or added drugs. In a fluid motion, Tahara lit it with a cheap, plastic lighter.

“If you don’t mind...”

“I like to make friends with rich folks. Especially rich, *capable* folks.”

“I see... What a strange cigar...”

The minister seemed drawn to its fragrance until it finally overcame his wariness for the unknown substance. As soon as he took the plunge and inhaled, he felt his exhausted mind clear and even the weight melt off of his shoulders.

“Ooh... This...is just...”

“Can’t have a drink without one.” Tahara tilted his glass again, relishing the combination.

More relaxed now, the minister swirled his drink in his mouth, thoroughly elated.

“What did you do with the *thing* the Tzardom left behind?”

Tahara’s question made the minister snap up like he had been splashed with ice water. He now realized that Tahara, as much as he came across as a businessman, was also a politician.

“We contacted the Tzardom,” the minister answered, “but have only received

the template answer that the man in question was bedeviled and had nothing to do with the Tzardom.”

“Thrown under one big bus, wasn’t he? Poor little bishop,” Tahara chuckled as the minister remained silent, uneasy to nod along. “Who do you think has the right to claim that little lost and found?”

“Th-That would belong to you... Given how the Tzardom has relinquished the right...”

“Oh yeah? And what happened to the *goods*?”

The goods, of course, were the copious amounts of Trance and the highly dangerous Krack, imported from Hellion territory.

“I must...apologize once more...!”

“Yeah? What for?”

“Members of the Jack of All Trades company from Euritheis have stormed the site, taking with them all of the uh, *goods*, despite our protests...” The minister would have preferred this topic to have not come up; it was another blunder on Suneo’s part.

“I see... The Secretary saw this coming too.”

“Pardon?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.”

Blowing out smoke, Tahara recalled the incident. The bishop’s pilgrimage took him all through the continent, hoarding all donations and raking in profits from trades along the way. Still, the Demon Lord had walked away without so much as a glance at the pile of wealth. Tahara couldn’t help but think: *The music box all over again. He’s got a real knack for dangling juicy bait.* What’s more, his prey did not expect the bait to be hooked with such a catastrophic trap. Tahara saw his boss as a masterfully sinister fisherman, scheming with every breath, reeling in the net at exactly the right time. The catch, of course, was destined for the chopping block. *Our next prey is the Jack of All Trades...or Euritheis itself. I get it. The Secretary’s looking to make that place a bridgehead. I’d better get a move on, then.*

In this moment, Tahara's misunderstanding escalated further, so much so that the Demon Lord might have keeled over if he had been privy to Tahara's conjecture.

Seeing Tahara fall silent, the minister rushed to explain, "Th-Those scoundrels have burned us repeatedly, from delay of payment, strong-arming negotiations, to even paying for goods with Trance. We deeply condemn..." The minister continued to mumble some weak excuses. Long story short, all Suneo could do against a foreign company practically invading them by force was protest loudly.

"A bunch of Trance and this rare Krack, huh...? How much do you think those went for?"

He knows of Krack too...?!

Unlike his lazy boss, Tahara had made sure to thoroughly investigate the forgotten cargo after sending off those involved in the incident to the village of Rabbi.

This is bad... The minister thought. *I have to talk my way out of this...!* He couldn't afford for Tahara to demand restitution for the stolen drugs, just when they were about to reach an agreement.

Watching the color drain from the minister's face, Tahara went on. "I know you deal with teas as well. You picky about the quality of those?"

"Huh? Well, yes..." The minister thinned his eyes warily.

Nobles and merchants on the continent preferred tea above all other drinks, leading to increased production of the plant.

"Heard you toss all the tea leaves that don't meet your strict standards."

"Our strict standards are why our products are so enjoyed and trusted."

"What do you say? If you're going to toss them anyway, you mind throwing them our way?"

"What...?" Puffing on his cigarette, the minister thought hard. *What's happening...? What is he getting to...?* The cost to restore Suneo's capital could have been astronomical. The last thing on his mind was tea leaves.

Putting out his cigarette, Tahara spoke in a sing-song way, “There are a bunch of different teas: white, yellow, green, blue, red, and black.”

“So you’re familiar...”

“High-quality red tea’s all the rage on this continent, but I want to provide the working folk with a cheaper alternative.”

His eyes wandering from art piece to art piece, the minister turned the cogs in his brain. If mere tea was going to settle this deal, he wanted to shake hands and be done with it. Dismayed by the rapidly shifting conversation, his face now resembled a shriveled tea leaf.

Tahara continued, “You sell your top-quality, brand-name tea to the nobles, and we sell cheap tea to the working class. We’ll have separate clientele, so no competition.”

“Th-That’s true...”

“If demand spreads to the working class, you’ll have a bigger customer base. When one door closes, another one opens, huh? Ha ha ha!”

The minister managed to fake a smile, which failed to mask his confusion. He understood Tahara’s points, but he was tired of discussing tea leaves and other items, wanting to move on with negotiating the exact amount of restitution.

“Glad we’ve settled things, now—”

“What?!”

“What’s the matter? Anything else you want to talk about?”

“N-No, not all... Not a single thing!”

Tahara nearly laughed at the minister’s desperation, but he didn’t forget to throw him a little bone. “You’ve been staring at the pieces in the room. Why don’t you pick one and take it with you?”

“I wouldn’t dare...”

“You came all this way in the heat. If I let you go without a little something, my boss will chew me out.”

“I-In that case...”

It was relatively commonplace for diplomats to leave meetings with some sort of personal souvenir: one of the perks of the job. The minister stood before one of the paintings he had been eyeing and let out a grunt. Every piece in the room was an undisputed masterpiece, each hidden from the public by dynasties of Holylight nobles for centuries. As such, most of them were priceless.

“The famous *Waves of the Dead Sea*... It really exists...!”

“You like that one? Take it.”

“Ar-Are you sure? I won’t let my hands off of it!” The minister took the painting, holding it like he was protecting a child. As ridiculous as he looked, valuable art was worth their own lives for art-loving nobles. Safe to say, the minister would not let go of the painting unless his hands were chopped off.

“Our boss ain’t the stingy type. Once you follow through with your end of the deal, you can shop at McDonald’s in the village. Bet you’ll like some pieces there.”

“I-I’m looking forward to it...”

Tahara and the minister shook hands, agreeing to draft up an official contract for building a branch location, preparing the one million gold medallions for show, and for giving over the tea leaves that would have been discarded.

The minister left, filled with relief after dreading what astronomical price was going to be demanded of him. *I never thought things would be settled with tea leaves...* To top it off, he was walking away with a priceless masterpiece as a souvenir. The only hiccup was the one million gold medallions, but if it was just for show, the process would be time-consuming, but not unprofitable.

He plans to sell art pieces hidden away from the world to our country... Holylight had ruled a vast territory for over two thousand years with an ample noble population. According to rumors, the nation held countless art pieces.

After the talk of the branch and tea leaves, it seems he intends to build a lasting business relationship with us rather than extort us for a one-time payment. It’s mutually beneficial in the long run... The minister couldn’t help but wonder how things would have gone down if he had been dealing with the Jack of All Trades or any other nation. They would have demanded something

extreme, using their work in the battle as a bargaining chip, which, naturally, would have created an enduring divide between them.

Such a generous demeanor... He seems well versed in business as well. The meeting with Tahara had brought a breath of fresh air to the minister after dealing with the war-happy savagery of the Northern Nations. As he was relieved by the surprisingly pleasant result of the meeting, the minister was eager to seriously do business with this newborn force in Holylight... A force that would soon be struggling against the central nobles.

A conflict will soon sweep the nation of Holylight... I must caution His Majesty to keep a close eye on the tide. From what I've seen in that Tahara, even the central nobles will not have an easy time with them. The minister was certain now that Tahara's boss was none other than the man who called himself the Demon Lord, the very same monster who blew the Tzardom's mock angel to smithereens. While the minister had not witnessed the carnage in action, he recalled the deep chill in his spine at seeing the wreckage of the mock angel. *We have a considerable relationship with the nobles too, but if I were to choose who would be standing longer...*

With the incoming conflict on his mind, the minister returned to the lobby of the resort, where the other messenger awaited him with visible fear. He ran over to the minister.

"M-Minister... How did the meeting transpire?"

As the minister felt pity for the messenger, he couldn't help but feel superior, knowing that his matter had already been settled. "I met a man named Tahara who seemed to have an important role here... A very reasonable gentleman indeed."

"You mean... There were no outrageous demands?"

"Not only that, but I received a wonderful souvenir. I must return to my homeland."

Seeing the minister relieved had only worsened the Republic messenger's uneasiness, as he feared the minister had forgotten their promise of camaraderie.

“Minister, lest you forget that we have—”

“We have nothing as of this point in time.”

“Wha—?! How could you—”

“*Our* negotiations have concluded... That is all.” The minister gave the messenger an icy glare.

He had just made it through a storm with his ship miraculously intact. Who in their right mind would have changed course back into the same storm for a complete stranger? The minister of Suneo was no martyr, only a clever man who knew how to do business. The last thing he wanted now was to ruin an opportunity by sticking his nose in another man’s business.

“That being said, I can afford neighborly advice.”

“Ad-Advice...?”

“Said gentleman is a man with reason, but I expect his fury to fall swiftly on those without.” The minister continued on to say that there was no need for negotiations on their part to begin with. “They had enough strength to eliminate the Satanists, take out the giant devil that toyed with even the Elemental Knights, then defeat a mock angel, albeit a greatly damaged one. They could threaten violence to solve most of their problems. The fact that he doesn’t,” the minister concluded, “indicates foresight immeasurably far and wide.”

“Far and wide...”

The minister walked away without a second glance, clearly eager to return home and make preparations for what was to come, a bounce in his step.

With an envious glare at the minister, the Republic messenger ventured forth to the room where Tahara was waiting. *I-It’ll be fine... Suneo got off scot-free...* His step faltering as he walked the halls of a building that seemed to belong in another dimension, the messenger managed to work up a bit of courage. *If they’re looking to do business, we have unparalleled locations when it comes to recreation...* The Republic of Edogawa served as a sandbag against Animania, where the wealthy and nobility spent war season vacationing in the seaside tropical paradise. Nobles even had a sort of competition in hosting the most

lavish boat parties.

He may demand a claim to the best spots or some other perk... As war raged on, more and more people flocked to the Republic. Hotel rooms in premium locations were fought over, the opulent struggle now an annual tradition of sorts. Naturally, many deals were struck in the process, with plenty of potential kickbacks for ambassadors of the Republic.

I have to expect some loss, but I must play my cards carefully... The messenger knocked on the office door and shakily opened it. Inside, Tahara awaited him with an expression that completely contrasted the friendly behavior he had shown the minister. Naturally, the table was empty, lacking any bottles or other display of hospitality.

"Name's Tahara. You're the messenger from the Republic? Sit down. I don't have all day."

"Y-Yes..."

"Blows my mind that *no one* came to see me sooner, considering we saved your entire damn country. Is everyone taking a nap up there?"

"N-No, we never intended to... With sincere apologies, we—"

"Not to mention, we took in refugees from Animania just the other day. Glad to see you're up and about now."

You did that of your own accord! The messenger nearly protested but was silenced by the air in the room. That was a project that the Republic had only funded, having promptly shoved all responsibility onto the paladin. They had no right to complain about any of Weeb's decisions.

"The paladin was lamenting your lack of humanity. Guess the Secretary's lost all faith in your country as well. Hasn't mentioned you guys since."

"Th-There were delays in reaching a consensus for... We never meant any..."

"If the Invasion kept on, you wouldn't have even been able to *reach consensus*. Wars aren't fought in boardrooms, you know." Tahara lit a cigarette, staring down the messenger with an icy stare devoid of any semblance of compromise or cooperation—the polar opposite of the demeanor he had

shown the minister of Suneo.

“So, I’ve got a proposal for you. Take it or leave it; it’s up to you.”

“A p-proposal...?” The messenger swallowed, waiting for Tahara to continue with bated breath.

But what happened next was completely unexpected to him.

“I want the city of Rookie, the Bastille Dungeon and all.”

“What...?!”

“Call it a ‘joint crimewatch’ or whatever to keep things simple.”

“No matter what we call it, you demand an entire city from us?!” The messenger could no longer stay in his seat. This was too much, no matter how much the Republic owed the Demon Lord.

“Already told you. Take it or leave it. Ball’s in your court.”

“Outrageous! We have gratitude for your aid in the Invasion, but this is far too...!”

Tahara maintained his cold expression, not even looking at him but at the tropical fish in an aquarium. “Just so you know, we won’t lift a finger for the next Invasion. Don’t know if the paladin’ll be too grateful either. The Tzardom could send you some troops, but by the time they get to you, your whole country will be burnt to ash.”

“All we have to do is ask our neighboring nations for aid...” The messenger trailed off, realizing that Edogawa would *also* be demanded exorbitant restitution by them, possibly even land grants. Of course, their neighboring nations would demand their lucrative resort spots in that case, instead of the danger-ridden borderlands or a city that had just experienced an Invasion.

But he wants the city of Rookie? What for...? Calming himself, the messenger sat back down on the sofa. He searched Tahara’s expression for any tells but found nothing. Currently in Rookie, the Bastille Dungeon was unstable, crime was up, and the city was so heavily damaged that restoration would cost a fortune. The more the minister thought about it, the more Rookie felt like a burden on the Republic. *Worst case scenario, those jobless bums may even start*

rioting... The paladin had taken charge of the city to attempt to mitigate the panic somewhat, but he was bound to leave sooner or later. No one could predict what was going to happen after he was gone and the dungeon was unsealed.

“This proposal... Is that your only demand?”

“We’re not asking for anything else.”

The messenger felt even more confused. What did they want with the city with all of its inherent risks? *In a way...this may not be such a bad deal.* The Republic mostly cared about their northern resort lands and their eastern coast. In fact, the Four Pillars that ruled the Republic had even suggested cutting off the fortress on the border and the city of Rookie from the rest of the Republic, abandoning them altogether. With Holylight offering to take on that liability, they could very possibly jump onto the opportunity.

“I almost forgot,” Tahara added, “The Secretary’s dealings with the Anima. You saw what happened the other day.”

“I... Well...!” The messenger was at a loss for words; why was he mentioning the Anima now? “Is that...a threat?”

“Not my intention. Just saying that if we take on the city of Rookie, we would basically border Animania. The Secretary can talk to them.”

“Talk...? They see us as inferior. There is no conversation to be had with them...”

“You think so? The Secretary thinks they’re fun to be around,” Tahara chuckled, puffing smoke from his cigarette.

This was true, as the Demon Lord had made connections with the Anima, and not just with any Anima either—he had met with the Grand Priestess revered by all of Animania and with an Animadmiral feared by most of the continent. After the Dragon, who watched over the nation, had declared that all Anima should let the Demon Lord be, he had become untouchable in the nation.

Considering all of this, Tahara’s follow-up seemed believable: “We don’t mind if you leave the deal. It just means we’ll sit back and watch no matter what Animania does next. Makes sense, right?” The blatant threat made the

messenger grit his teeth, but Tahara decided to flash more bait. “Think about it this way. It’s only going to cost you a city to buy your security.”

“Security...?”

“If you pawn Rookie off to us, you’ll be safe from the Anima and from the risk of Invasion inherent to the Bastille Dungeon. Peace and security are your bread and butter, aren’t they? We’re offering to take that burden off your shoulders for the low price of a single city. Is that really a complete loss for you guys?”

“N-No...” The messenger had gradually lowered his chin as Tahara went on. The Republic attracted the richest of the rich only because their resorts were completely detached from war. Ever since the Invasion, tourism had been dropping. If the Anima were to make any threatening moves, tourism would plummet, costing the Republic their most valuable income, and soon their entire economy. *A single city in exchange for safety...*

The messenger considered the pros and cons: Giving away Rookie would damage their reputation in some way, and they would lose out on loot from the dungeon as well as the tax income from adventurers and merchants. Those cons, however, paled in comparison to the threat of Animanian Invasion. *Upon further consideration, is this not an opportunity for us to rid that long-standing tumor once and for all...?* Freed from the threat of Animanian Invasion and the responsibility of the Bastille Dungeon that was keeping resort guests away, the Republic could focus on their lucrative vacation business.

“A few things I would like to discuss, Mister Tahara...”

“You have a brand new look in your eyes. Made up your mind?”

“We do have our reputation to consider... Relinquishing the city without so much as a battle would paint us in too bad of a light. No matter the deal under the surface, we request as much consideration as you can afford when it comes to explanations.”

“Yeah, we’ll play it cool. Like I said, let’s call it a ‘joint crimewatch’ or something for a while,” Tahara offered, snubbing out his cigarette. He was only after control of the city and couldn’t care less what excuse the Republic wanted to use.

“Our wish list is pretty long right now. But we don’t mind throwing you a bone or two.”

“Which means...?”

“We’ll go through the goods, but we can toss you the overstock. At a friends and family discount, of course.” Tahara cracked a grin and winked, proposing some form of mutually beneficial relationship, which the messenger seemed to pick up on. The tension in the room seemed to lift somewhat. “Like I said, we’ve got a long wish list. This is a good opportunity for us to start doing good business with your company. Must be boring when your only clients are those... What were they, the Four Pillars?”

“Holylight will import our merchandise...from the Kid Company?”

“Business has to go both ways. Can’t have one side getting all the perks.” Tahara lit another cigarette before dropping a bomb. “You know that Holylight has plenty of rich nobles. In fact, I just spoke to a minister from Suneo about setting up a shop for them here.”

“What...?!” After the initial shock, the messenger finally understood why the minister, who had entered the meeting doom and gloom, had emerged with a smirk and a skip in his step.

“You’ve done business with the top one percent for a long time, right? If you’ve got the confidence and knowledge, we’d consider setting up a shop for you as well.”

H-He’s trying to start a competition between Suneo and our Republic...!

Tahara was so cunning with his execution that the minister was more impressed than outraged; he seemed to be ready to use anything in his reach to turn a profit. “A branch for Suneo and a branch for the Republic... I doubt the nobles of Holylight will be happy with such an arrangement...” the messenger said probingly, but Tahara simply exhaled a puff of smoke, unbothered. In actuality, he was eager for the nobles to catch wind of this offer.

“There’ll be steam coming out of their ears to protect their bottom line. That’ll be a sight.”

He’s using this opportunity as a trigger for them... How far ahead is he

*thinking?! The messenger looked at Tahara with awe. After seeing that he had been lured here as part of his plan, the messenger wanted to avoid his bad*graces at any cost. *I need to strike a deal with him before leaving today...* The messenger immediately shifted over to talk business. The meeting went swimmingly, proceeding until the terms were acceptable to both sides and they shook hands. With the promise of signing an official contract at a later date, the Republic messenger left the office.

Now that I've paved the path that the Secretary opened up... Tahara humbly considered his day's work, despite him single-handedly cleaning up the massive messes that the Demon Lord had left behind. For all Tahara was concerned, he was barely keeping up with his boss. *We got the city he was after, but judging by its geography...* Looking at the map on the desk, a certain hypothesis (that was rapidly approaching conclusion) sprung to Tahara's mind. The Republic shared a border with Animania, and Suneo was situated across the Brackish Pond from Animania. Following the Demon Lord's track on the map, an interesting fact illuminated itself.

The Secretary's trying to blast an opening... The Republic and Suneo each stood like a gate blocking the advancement of the Anima. After this, however, Tahara considered the gates broken off their hinges. Whether the Demon Lord was trying to flood the Anima in or vice versa, Tahara saw an immense movement in the near future. *And now Euritheis to the north... Like he's bulldozing a straight path.* With a smirk, Tahara continued scheming, reminded once again of the capabilities of the man he followed.

Considering how the Demon Lord feared Tahara's misunderstandings more than anything, their particular relationship would always be a comedy skit. This concluded the day, both for the Demon Lord and his henchman. One played the day away in the pool, while the other made moves with a thundering crack across the continent. The Demon Lord's impromptu shenanigans seemed destined to be elevated to masterful schemes with the help of Tahara's mind. For better or worse, having an overqualified employee had created a fascinating juxtaposition for all to see.

You Unlocked Some Information!!

Republic of Edogawa

A republic ruled by the Four Pillars, a quartet of powerful nobles, and the Kid Company, which is tied to the Pillars. Their head of state rotates every two years to prevent a single Pillar from monopolizing the nation's power. It is seen as a buffer between Animania and the rest of the continent, as well as *the* resort destination during war season.

Kingdom of Suneo

Their entire nation operates as a trading company that produces various luxury items. The majority of the richest people on the continent swear by Suneo products, which has made Suneo the enemy of the other major trading companies around the continent. Suneo is a lender to nations and forces in turmoil, something they exploit to get others to solve their dirty work; any movement that threatens the status quo is eliminated while the nobles' hands stay clean.

Island Legion

Island nations of various sizes formed an alliance that thrives on fishing. Despite its collective title, each island nation retains their sovereignty and culture. The legion as a whole faces invasion from the Tzardom, which calls them heretics.

Crime in the Boardroom

The village of Rabbi continued to grow the already unprecedented disruption they were causing in the region; never before had such a large population congregated anywhere in the desolate lands of eastern Holylight. This rapid growth was thanks in part to small-time lords like Subwa *donating* their land to the village, as well as the arrival of former slaves rescued from Hellion territory. They seemed lost in the village at first, but coming out of their nightmarish experiences, they were quick to acclimate.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was leisurely leading Eagle through the crowded village.

“There are so many people here now...”

“I don’t mind the energy.”

Eagle was still astounded by the village’s constant evolution, while the Demon Lord remained unfazed; he couldn’t help but compare the place to the large cities in his previous life. *When you think about Tokyo, New York, Shanghai, or London...* He would not be impressed by anything less than a bona fide metropolis, with towering skyscrapers and a sleepless skyline.

As they noticed the pair pass, merchants and workers on the street all hurried to bow. Out of concern for Eagle struggling to adapt to village life, the Demon Lord had begun doing these daily strolls through the village with her. Much to Eagle’s discomfort, Tahara, Yu, Luna, or the Madam would accompany her in his stead at times.

“Um, like I’ve said before, I won’t be of any use to—”

“We’re just on a walk. Don’t worry about it.”

That was a tall order for Eagle, who felt more and more eyes looking her way.

The crowd murmured as they passed:

“The Demon Lord and an Anima...”

“I hear the demi-human is the Holy Maiden’s servant?”

“The Demon Lord’s concubine, according to what I heard... Doesn’t it look like it?”

“The girl’s sure pretty... Look at those shoulders.”

“Damn!”

The Demon Lord and Eagle continued with their peaceful stroll. He had the intention of wiping away the deep-rooted prejudice against Eagle by having her seen with the powerful leaders of the village. It was actually working too. Who would dare to pick a fight with someone always seen with those at the top?

“Some of the Bunnies have migrated back...”

“Thirty of them so far. All of them will return soon enough,” the Demon Lord declared without a shred of doubt. He seemed certain that nowhere but a world of his creation could be worth living in.



“You’re so confident all of the time. I envy you...”

“If one is to lead, he must not hesitate. Things work out better if I keep up the confident appearance, facade or not,” the Demon Lord brazenly confessed. He seemed more relaxed than he usually was with his advisors. “The Bunnies’ houses are rabbit shaped...? What’s the point of the ears?”

“I hear many species of Anima make particular types of shelter.”

“Those couldn’t even serve as lighting rods. I guess if it’s what they like...”

Construction had already started for the prodigal Bunnies, keeping the carpenters busy. In addition, temporary housing was popping up left and right to shelter the refugees who came from Hellion territory.

A man was clumsily carrying lumber through the construction site: Hummer, who had ended up enslaved in Hellion territory through a bizarre series of events. He carried his load even as his steps faltered while a spunky girl mocked him.

“Hey, old man! Why’re you all wobbling carrying a few sticks? How useless can you be?”

“I-I’m sorry! I haven’t worked in a while...”

“Ha! You a useless bum, old man?! A useless waste of space?!”

“I-I’m sorry... I’m ready to give it all I’ve got going forward...”

“There’s nowhere to go forward at *your* age! Piece. Of. Balding. Garbage!”

The combination of a submissive middle-aged man and an aggressive teen was a combination rife in fiction, but seeing it in person gave the Demon Lord a sick feeling in his stomach.

“Who does that brat think she is? Do I have to teach her a lesson?”

“I-I don’t know what you’re going to do,” Eagle interrupted, “but wait! That man brought me a letter from the paladin.”

“From Weeb?!”

The Demon Lord tore open the letter Eagle handed him. It contained an apology on behalf of the Tzardom, written with care. Of course, this wasn't addressed to the Demon Lord, but to Eagle. Additionally, the letter included a simple but heartfelt offer for Eagle to contact him through "Mr. Daruma" if anything should arise.

He hasn't changed... The Demon Lord thought. *He's ready to take on his own country.* He felt genuine curiosity towards Weeb and a strong desire to have him on his side...and the Demon Lord wasn't one to give up easily for anything he had interest in.

"So he's got something to do with the paladin..." he muttered and strode over to Hummer.

The girl that had been harassing Hummer couldn't believe her eyes; the most powerful person in the village was now approaching her with a stern look on his face.

"B-Bye, little trash man! B-Be careful out there! If you're going to screw up, make sure I'm watching!" She fled the scene with the color drained from her cheeks.

Hummer was left to cower before the Demon Lord, who seemed a more terrifying being than any he had faced in Hellion Territory.

"What's your name? Why did you bring the paladin's letter? How do you know him?" The Demon Lord asked questions in a rapid-fire tone like he was accusing a spouse of cheating.

"M-M-My name... Is H-H-H-Hummer..." Hummer squeezed out, his voice dry and shaking, completely not expecting that his reply would trigger further chaos.

"The letter says Daruma. You dare try to give me a fake name?"

"I-I would never! Lady Akane mistook my name...!"

"Akane...? What do you mean?"

The shift in the Demon Lord's expression made Hummer regret saying anything. He desperately tried to explain, but the Demon Lord appeared sterner

with every sentence.

“What are you saying?” The Demon Lord asked. “Akane found you in Hellion territory?”

“U-Uh, she saved me...” Hummer muttered, unsure of what to do as he, for some reason, sank to both knees, his head lowering towards the ground.

Finally, Eagle interfered out of pity, “I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

“I know that,” the Demon Lord answered. “I have a different theory about him.”

“A theory?”

“If Akane went through the trouble of picking him up, he could be a treasure.”

The bizarre comment made Eagle and Hummer exchange a look. Akane was equipped with many skills relating to treasure, like Collector, Lucky Star, Treasure Hunter, and Mint Master. Of course, she had never found and brought back a *person* in the Arena, but the effects of skills were greatly amplified in this world.

Him bumping into Akane and Mynk is one thing. But that led him to meeting the paladin, and now he’s sitting in front of me... Was it all really just a coincidence? Whether it was good or bad fortune that put Hummer in this situation, he had the very rare trait of having a personal relationship with Weeb.

“What else did you and he talk about?”

“H-He asked me to...write to him about the village.”

“As cautious as always. It shows how often he’s been betrayed.”

Hummer kept his head low, unable to say anything.

The Demon Lord had always felt that the paladin thought rather too cautiously for his age. If one still chose to carry on after numerous betrayals and overcome that crushing loss of hope, they had to protect their heart with layers of defenses, learn to doubt people, and second guess intentions. The Demon Lord assumed the paladin had gone through this.

“Write honestly about what you see in the village. Hold nothing back.”

“I-I don’t think I could undertake such an important—”

“He considers you an honest person. You’re evidently good enough for him to trust you with the task.”

“I-I’m really not worthy... I just kept running away from responsibilities all these years...”

“Running away, huh...? Then let’s hear a bit about your life,” the Demon Lord encouraged him, lighting his cigarette. He suspected that he could learn something new about the paladin through Hummer.

Hummer silently opened and closed his mouth for a while before quietly telling his tale. He came from an impoverished village where there was no work. He made it out to the city and tried various lines of work, but kept losing his job for not learning the skills quickly enough. After he had enough of that, he aspired to become an adventurer, only to injure his knee when a monster attacked him. He stuck to being a porter after that, even when it meant that adventurers younger than him would boss him around. Feeling like he had nowhere else to go on land, he made it out to sea, only to be captured and enslaved in Hellion territory. His whole life story was as unfortunate and pathetic as he looked, as if he was born under a miserable alignment of stars.

“I never took ownership of my life,” Hummer concluded. “I refused to work for my future, resigning myself to this miserable life of an errand boy, day after day. Before I knew it, I’m forty-eight... I’m useless, really.”

The Demon Lord listened to his story without expression, but Eagle showed genuine interest; perhaps she felt sympathy for him as someone who lived a similar life of drifting from place to place, unable to fit in.

“No wonder that brat was berating you,” the Demon Lord said. “And you’ve got that Toshiyuki Nishida look. Of course, *he’s* a nationally renowned actor...”

“T-Toshi...?”

“That being said, not many men can be so open about their flaws...” The Demon Lord slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke. “I wonder if I should live as simply as you sometimes...”

Hummer finally looked up after hearing that, and Eagle too wore an expression of surprise. For someone who lied and deceived as much as the Demon Lord did, Hummer was almost his polar opposite; perhaps the Demon Lord even felt jealous for his ability to be so vulnerable and honest.

“I won’t help you in any way,” the Demon Lord added, “but I won’t get in your way either. Write to him whatever you want as you live in this village.”

“Y-Yes, sir...”

“And you were ashamed that you’ve been running away... But everyone tries to avoid and run from suffering. It’s only natural.” The Demon Lord turned his back and continued to speak from his heart, without knowing why he was being so honest with this miserable man. “It doesn’t matter how much you suffer along the way or how many times you fall down, as long as you stand as the victor in the end. You can always try again, as long as you have the will for it.”

The Demon Lord walked away, leaving Hummer standing there dumbfounded as Eagle hurried after him. Her expression had shifted from concern to surprise. “I, well...didn’t expect you to say something like that.”

“I don’t know why I did either... He’s a strange man, indeed.”

They continued walking until they reached a group of workers clad in peculiar clothes: people from the Island Legion where Eagle formerly resided. As they approached the group, evidently on their break, all stood to greet them.

“Mister Demon Lord...! And Eagle...”

“How are you faring here? Getting used to the village?”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

“I know your environment is far from ideal. I’ll soon have comfortable lodgings ready for you.”

“Th-That’s too kind...!”

Actually, the workers were treated better than they had ever even dreamed. The village had plenty of food and water, steady work that paid daily, and even access to the heavenly amenities of the public bath for a mere three bronze coins. This was all the bare minimum for the Demon Lord, but it was paradise

compared to the Island Legion and the threat of the Tzardom. In fact, they could hardly believe that people could live such comfortable lives.

“It’s about time I get back to work,” the Demon Lord said. “Eagle, take your time.”

“Okay...”

After the Demon Lord left, the tension lifted and the group let out a sigh of relief.

“E-Eagle, are you, well, all right...?”

“What?”

“I mean... Has anything bad happened to you here?”

“N-No! I’m treated so well here.”

Those from the Island Legion seemed concerned about Eagle, worried she might have been taken hostage or made a concubine by the godfather, further reinforced by the quiet and delicate air about her.

“That’s good to hear... This place *is* incredible. I’d believe it if they told me this was heaven.”

“Yes, it really is...”

The Island Legion was an archipelago that thrived on the fishing industry, which meant that the sea decided who lived and died. With the Tzardom rapidly invading, citizens of the Legion lived day by day, not knowing if they would make it to see the next.

“If only the folks from the other islands could join us here...”

“How can they when we’re so far away?”

“I know, but at this rate, the Tzardom’s going to enslave them all...”

Listening to their conversation, Eagle gazed in the direction the Demon Lord had gone off to with a new expression of anticipation.

The Demon Lord returned to the casino and entered the meeting room on the thirteenth floor where his advisors awaited him.

Ugh... Another meeting. It's more than I can take!

Without anyone to commend him on his honesty, the Demon Lord took his seat with a solemn expression.

Another cruel meeting for the Demon Lord's army commenced as Tahara and Yu spread various documents on the long table. Cruel, at least, to the Demon Lord, who already looked visibly pained.

Kondo alone kept a small gaming device palmed under the desk, giving it quick glances here and there: a game titled *Sumogotchi*, the object of which was to raise a chick into a big and healthy sumo wrestler. As Kondo lovingly raised the chick by potty training it, teaching it sumo squats, and feeding it chankonabe, the meeting carried on with gravitas.

The first topic on the agenda was Holy Maiden White. "She and I now have an *understanding*," the Demon Lord started. "Keep that in mind moving forward."

Tahara and Yu made note of this as Kondo's chick earned a new mawashi.

White... The Demon Lord recalled his grand performance, complete with a full costume. He had intended to take advantage of her misunderstanding by contacting her under the guise of the Fallen Angel, thinking that it would lessen her resistance towards their acquisition of the entire eastern Holylight. *What happened on the rooftop was another big mess...* A tableau flashed in his mind, the two of them locked in what could only be interpreted as a lovers' embrace... A powerful, completely unforeseen chemical reaction had occurred, overpowering the Demon Lord's petty, con artist mindset. Now her beauty had stuck a sharp impression in his mind. *She's a good girl, but I'm worried that some guy's going to come along and... Am I that guy?!*

As the Demon Lord was approaching this self-realization, Tahara had posted a map on the whiteboard showing how their land acquisition (under the guise of "donations") was accelerating fast. The neighboring lords seemed to take after Subwa, not wanting to miss the opportunity to offer their land early on when they could still make a good impression on the Demon Lord, rather than later, when their land would inevitably be taken from them regardless. There were competent and incompetent nobles alike, but they all shared a keen sense of self-preservation.

“When we take the Holy City, Tahara, *encourage* them to donate it to the Holy Church and its control. I have no need for that dusty old place.”

“Hm?” Tahara contemplated the comment for a few moments before reaching a conclusion.

The Demon Lord had intended to give White more power while making the transaction more convincing to the populace, but Tahara naturally reached a different conclusion. “Gotcha, gotcha. There’s been one blurry spot in this big picture of yours, Mister Secretary, that I couldn’t make out. It’s starting to clear up now.”

“You’ll see...” The Demon Lord stood from his seat and walked to the window to gaze down upon the village in an important-looking manner.

The advisors saw incredible gravity and significance in his silhouette, as if their dear leader could see everything from Rabbi to the four corners of the continent.

Of course, the Demon Lord had no such foresight or cunning; he merely turned his back to the room in order to conceal his expression. *I’ve got a bad feeling about this... Where is this going?!* The Demon Lord, having apparently developed a more acute sense of detecting dangerous situations, felt his heart rate accelerate as the conversation continued behind him.

“Hey, Tahara,” Yu joined in. “Do you mean...”

“Straight up. We gotta keep our guests *wealthy*, don’t we?”

“So the Secretary already envisions how to rule this world after the war...”

“Ha ha ha! ‘Rule of three’? More like rule of five! With a solid foundation like this, we could duke it out with any country out there for a decade at a time.”

The Demon Lord grew more and more uneasy; he could hardly turn around and ask “What the hell are you two talking about?” Meanwhile, Kondo’s digital chick had just sumo-slapped an egg. A new chicklet emerged, but Kondo muttered some curses followed by “Another fricken common...”

Tahara pulled the red pencil from on top of his ear and slid it across the map. “The Holy Church might have their share of influence, but they’ll stop breathing

down our necks when we toss them everything we make from that capital.”

“Yes, and we can transfer nobles that have bent their knee to the affluent Central...” Yu stood, running a marker across the whiteboard to write ominous terms like *customers* and *fertilizer* and circling them.

“Up north’s next on the docket, but the front line’ll be right here for a while. Let’s have Grandpa Harts keep taking charge.” Tahara, too, inscribed scary thoughts like *capital influx* and *bolster army to 10,000* on the northern section of the map.

All of this was completely flying over the Demon Lord’s head, but he made sure to send the advisors an interested look as he lit a cigarette. *Whatever they’re doing, I have to keep up an air of fostering the discourse of my employees.* He shrewdly kept his mouth shut and listened; the advisors took the cue and continued their conversation.

“With their track record, it’d be easiest to let the Butterfly family rule the entire south.”

“No objections there.”

The tags *women’s paradise*, *spa*, and *hot springs* were added to the southern locales on the map. Apparently, they were already mapping out the *new* Holylight.

“As for the troublesome west...” said Yu.

“Let’s have the *almighty* Dona round up the opposition. Might get some *international guests* too, but I’d take care of them in a day.”

“Not a chance! If I let you handle the subjects, you’ll turn them into Swiss cheese!”

“It’d be a better death for them; put them out of their misery.”

“It’s more important to acquire a large number of samples. Besides, there’s no need to be concerned with the quality of their deaths when it comes to the enemies of the Secretary. They deserve torment.”

Kondo listened to all of this and thought to himself, *Great. I don’t have to do anything.*

The Demon Lord listened to all of this and thought to himself, *Maybe I'm the one who's on a wagon bound for market...*

"In any case, I hear pockets are lined *thick* in the west. Too much wealth to measure after two thousand years of oppression and exploitation."

"They will offer up everything to the Secretary: their lives, dignity, wealth, down to their last drop of blood."

These two are freaking me out! the Demon Lord silently shouted under his solemn facade. *They're really gunning to start a war...!* In a desperate attempt to change the subject, he decided to finally speak up in the most serious tone he could muster. "It is fine to set our sights on the future, but we must attend to the matter at hand." The arrival of the two messengers was the perfect distraction. "Your meeting with those foreign dignitaries, Tahara?" the Demon Lord asked, rather nervous of the answer. He was particularly concerned with Suneo, who could have very well demanded restitution.

"I was going to make a report once it was all official," Tahara answered, "but I settled things with Suneo for a million gold medallions ready to show, a branch in our town, and their surplus tea leaves."

The Demon Lord was shaken by this answer. *I don't understand a thing he said! Are we still speaking the same language?!* Unwilling to show his ignorance, the Demon Lord simply closed his eyes and waited, as if to contemplate the information; in reality, he was looking for a plausible answer. "I see... Interesting." The Demon Lord curled his lips while his brain short-circuited.

"Soft? Maybe. I thought the best way to keep workers around was to set up work for their families too."

"Hm..."

"Women can process the tea leaves. We won't be paying for materials, so that'd be a sweet gig. Kids can use fountain water and soap to start a laundry service or something."

Water was precious on this continent, so no one washed their clothes frequently, let alone workers. Most of them wore one outfit and never washed

it. The public bath had allowed them to bathe as often as they wanted, but their clothes were another matter. Yu seemed agreeable to this suggestion that would make the village more hygienic. Kondo seemed confident that no one was paying him any mind, as he brazenly power-leveled his characters in *Fake/smut night*.

“Well done. Even better than I had expected,” the Demon Lord said, quietly relieved that he didn’t owe any restitution.

Tahara, however, had more to discuss. “And it looks like your trap sprung perfectly, Mister Secretary.”

“Oh...? Splendid,” the Demon Lord smirked with a shrug of his shoulders, panicking internally. Tahara seemed to be speaking an alien language.

“Gotta laugh at how many simple-minded jack offs we’re dealing with, huh?”

I gotta laugh because you won’t explain a single thing to me!

As the Demon Lord’s confusion was peaking, unexpected aid came from Yu. “Mister Secretary, that drug called Krack is extremely dangerous. It could melt the user down to their bones.”

“Drugs... Reprehensible,” the Demon Lord managed to react but still failed to grasp the meaning of their conversation.

Tahara jumped on this comment. “Reprehensible, indeed. This Jack of All Trades from Euritheis is apparently an old group of friends of the dear bishop.”

“The Tzardom is going to feign ignorance all the way,” Yu chimed in. “And the claim to the cargo?”

“Checked with the minister of Suneo, just in case. The stolen goods are ours for the taking.”

“Stealing the Secretary’s cargo... They must have a horrible death wish.”

“Hah ha ha! They’re pure masochists, for sure!”

Tahara and Yu laughed away as color drained from the Demon Lord’s face. His advisors were acting like he had planned this.

It sounds like we’re getting these crazy narcotics?! I don’t want that stuff! The

Demon Lord nearly protested out loud, but now that he managed to get a grasp of the conversation topic, he tried to gently stir the conversation away from such a perilous topic. “And the Republic...?”

“First off, I got them to hand over the city of Rookie you were after.”

“Hand over, you say...?” the Demon Lord repeated in an implicit way, as he once again failed to understand.

Tahara seemed to infer discontentment in the Demon Lord’s tone, so he began explaining, “That’s my bad... I wanted them to bring it to us on a silver platter, but I went for expediency over presentation. If you’d let me make an excuse, though, I barely keep up with your plans.”

You’re the one I can’t keep up with! I just drank and loafed around! the Demon Lord almost confessed but managed to keep his mouth shut, furthering the now-customary misunderstanding between him and his admiring advisors. As usual, his aimless shenanigans were given meaning by Tahara, who took care of every aspect perfectly with his cunning genius and thorough consideration for keeping things calm in the village.

Yu, however, had no intention of letting this mishap slide. “You’re pathetic. You’re suggesting that our position is so weak as to need the city *handed over*?”

“I told you, the Secretary’s way too fast for me. He foresaw what went down today and made connections with higher-ups in Animania, smashed a chunk of Hellion territory, and came back with Suneo owing *us* a favor. The best I can do is catch up!”

“Is that supposed to be an excuse? I might modify you so you can work 365 without rest or sleep.”

“Like hell you will! What am I, a robot?!”

As the terrifying exchange of his advisors carried on, the Demon Lord felt a mild dizzy spell come on. Trying to make it out of the room as quickly as possible, he barely managed to say, “Our time is precious. What is my next move, Tahara?” As he did, the Demon Lord patted himself on the back for his choice of words; this allowed him to finally get a straight answer while still playing the part of an encouraging boss.

“The Republic’s terrified of an Anima invasion,” Tahara answered. “The fort on their border is only for show.”

“I see. I’ll make sure they don’t tread too close to that fort, then.”

“Right... Thanks, chief.”

With that, the Demon Lord hurried to leave the meeting room when Yu called to him.

“Mister Secretary, Harts has requested to return to his home base.”

“Very well. I’m on my way out, so I’ll take him. Come with me, Kondo.”

“Wha-Wha-What?! I have to go *outside*?! Where there’s nothing of value whatsoever?!”

“That’s for me to decide. Let’s go.”

With the befuddled Kondo in tow, the Demon Lord left the meeting room.

The two remaining advisors maintained a meaningful silence before Tahara muttered. “To *that fort*, huh...?” This could be interpreted as the Demon Lord giving them permission to attack any other tactical location in the Republic. In fact, Tahara was confident of the Demon Lord’s intentions.

“The Secretary intends to put pressure on the Republic using the Anima.”

“You betcha. They’d eventually let go of that land on the border.”

Tahara foresaw the Republic to voluntarily relinquish the fortress on the border and its surrounding area once the Anima became more active.

If one falls, the rest will follow... This was almost a rerun of the land donation craze currently occurring in eastern Holylight. Tahara felt a chill at how the Demon Lord constantly sowed seeds in thorough preparation, then struck like lightning as soon as an opportunity presented itself. Yu appeared infatuated by the same idea.

“The world’s full of problems, but he’s dead last on my list of people I’d want to make an enemy of.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Your minuscule brain wouldn’t last three days against the Secretary.”

“Yeesh... It’s scary having your boss see through everything,” Tahara shrugged without denying Yu’s assessment.

In truth, Tahara would demolish the Demon Lord in any sort of battle of wit. In a battle of chess, for instance, the Demon Lord would be stripped of every single one of his pieces as well as his entire wardrobe, kicked to the curb in the middle of winter.

Meanwhile, the two advisors continued their overestimating (or rather, overthinking) regarding the Demon Lord.

“I mentioned it earlier, but the Secretary’s big picture’s been on my mind. From what we talked about today, I’m guessing it’s *that*.”

“Oh? An interesting theory.”

“Take a look at this map. Rabbi’s a bit too far east for us to take over the entirety of Holylight.”

As Tahara had pointed out, the village of Rabbi was indeed located in eastern Holylight, not to mention in the middle of nowhere. If they were to take control of the entire country, the Holy City in the center did seem like the most strategic target.

“But the Secretary said he had no use for the Holy City...” Yu muttered.

“No wonder there. Look at Holylight and Animania as one big country.”

“Oh!” Yu exclaimed. When looking at the map that way, once the border between Holylight and Animania was taken away, dead center was the village of Rabbi. Chills ran down the spines of the two advisors at the realization that they were already stationed in the center of it all.

“He saw this coming from the very beginning,” said Tahara. “Us mere mortals can only hope to catch up to him.”

In reality, things were working out for the Demon Lord and his advisors exactly according to Tahara’s misguided vision. At this rate, his misunderstandings and overthinking would not cease until they took control of the entire continent.

“The Secretary’s after Euritheis, he said?”

“Yeah, looks like we’re in for another mind-blowing magic trick.”

The pair shared a laugh at this, but the Demon Lord was indeed about to show them a trick. Not exactly a cunning one, but more of con artist trickery.

The Demon Lord's World Tour

The Demon Lord hastily exited through the casino lobby followed by a cowering Kondo. Going outside was stressful enough for him, let alone doing it with his boss.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord too was overwhelmed by the length of his mental to-do list. *Damn it, there's a bunch of work on my plate all of a sudden... Euritheis, was it? I've gotta go there too... But first I have to take Harts home and talk with the Anima...* The Demon Lord stopped and looked back at Kondo. His gaze alone made Kondo jump in his skin, horrified. *While I'm at it, I should take this agoraphobe out to see a bunch of places. It'll help him Quick Travel too... He'll never step outside the building, let alone the village, if I don't drag him.* The Demon Lord originally brought Kondo along out of fear that Tahara and Yu's misunderstandings would infect him.

"What did you make of our meeting, Kondo?"

"Huh?! U-Uh, I think that they were talking about some complicated stuff..." Kondo said vaguely, as he couldn't very well have admitted to playing video games the whole time.

The Demon Lord let out a sigh of relief, figuring that Kondo had barely listened to the meeting at all, especially after he had designed him to only be interested in the world of fiction.

"We will fly from location to location, which will benefit you in the future. Keep your eyes open everywhere we go so at least you can Quick Travel there moving forward."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Relieved that he wasn't reprimanded for playing his game during the meeting, Kondo followed after the Demon Lord, now with a hop in his step.

Once they left the casino, people on the streets began talking.

“It’s the Demon Lord...!”

“No way... That’s Kondo! He’s outside!”

“Wait, I can’t! He’s too cute!”

“He’s wearing another one of his weird shirts... Adorbs!”

“Ooooh! Over here, Kondo!”

Perhaps because of his rarity, Kondo was extremely popular with the ladies. He had been popular among a certain group of female players back in the game, often being teased in various fan fiction.

A weird shirt... the Demon Lord thought. *It’s their doing...* The Demon Lord looked disheartened, thinking of the development team. In the late days of the game, there was a slew of bizarre clothes influenced by the diverse nationalities of the team. The best examples of this were Kondo’s shirts, which were adorned with bizarre phrases. Today, his shirt said things like “Kenshiro,” “Condensed Milk,” and “Tree Fiddy.” These memories being reflected in reality amused the Demon Lord enough to call to Kondo with a teasing tone.

“You’re a popular guy, Kondo.”

“P-Please... Real-life women are a nightmare. I have plenty of girls waiting for me at the beach, not to mention mackerel in sexy clothing.”

Mackerel in sexy clothing...? What did I just hear?

Harts awaited them outside of the Hot Springs Resort, kneeling. He seemed resolute to return to his fortress, away from the village and his temptations.

“My people tell me you’re returning to the fortress,” the Demon Lord called. “I’ll take you there.”

“I am honored.”

Kondo stared at his feet as he grabbed the end of the Demon Lord’s long coat, and as soon as the Demon Lord placed his hand on Harts’s shoulder, the world around them spun. In the blink of an eye, they had arrived at Gatekeeper, the grand fortress that protected Holylight from the war-torn North. *It’s been a while since I was here last...* The Demon Lord reminisced. *I came with Yukikaze and Mikan by carriage.* The Demon Lord observed his surroundings, relishing in

his memories.

The place had looked rather run-down during his last visit, but not today. Supplies provided by the Madam were stacked and stored at every corner, men happily carrying them. The cargo consisted not only of food and Water Spell Stones but also resources like iron, copper, salt, oil, textiles, and more. No one could remember the last time the fortress was so rich in supplies.

“The place is rather energized compared to before,” the Demon Lord remarked.

“All because of you,” Harts admitted, watching his men with joy and relief.

Despite Harts’s sentiment, the Demon Lord had no part in accomplishing this; they owed all of their thanks to the Madam and her support.

Kondo already seemed uninterested in the conversation as he had begun taking in the fortress from several angles, rapidly typing on his tablet.

“I hear it can get frigid in these parts. As a celebration of your return, per se, I want to set up a hot spring here,” the Demon Lord offered.

“Y-You mustn’t! Not that devilish place...!”

“Devilish...?”

“I-I mean to say that such an extravagant amenity might lower my soldiers’ fighting spirit!”

“I see... I’ll make it a public bath then. I hear there are plenty of women and children here in addition to your fighting men. There’s nothing better than a public bath to rejuvenate oneself after a long day of work.”

The Demon Lord hardly gave Harts a choice, but the old general was relieved that he at least stopped him from building a Hot Springs Resort; it had taken every fiber of his willpower to leave that place. Not even the most disciplined of armies could have lasted with that hot spring around.

“Where’s a good spot, Kondo?”

“Somewhere concealed and safe would be...here.”

Harts glanced at the bizarre board in Kondo’s hands and shook as he beheld a

drawing that resembled a bird's-eye view of Gatekeeper. "Impossible...! How did you acquire this drawing?!"

"H-How...? It's just a view from above..."

"From above...?! There are countless spells protecting the fortress..." Harts was devastated all over again. Even after all of the supernatural powers he had witnessed, this took the cake; not even military confidentiality meant anything in the wake of the Demon Lord. A view of a fortress from above meant that they had access to all information regarding its defenses and the movement of its soldiers.

"Let's get this set up then. I have a busy day ahead," said the Demon Lord.

"Mister Secretary, I want to go home..."

"Stop complaining. According to Tahara, this fortress is on the front lines. Take in everything for future reference."

As Harts stood dumbfounded, another Quick Travel occurred, bringing them to a courtyard at the center of the fortress. People around were surprised as the three materialized, then began spotting Harts and calling to him.

"Lord Harts, you've returned!"

"You look well, sir!"

"Our leader has returned!"

Harts awkwardly acknowledged each voice with the raise of his hand while his face grew pale. His men were about to witness something unbelievable.

"Adding Kanda River to the Base... Come forth, Public Bath!" With a wave of the Demon Lord's hand, a nostalgic-looking building appeared in the courtyard. To the Demon Lord, it was a familiar building with the charm of yesteryear, but the men of the fortress could only stare with their jaws on the floor. He turned around and nonchalantly remarked, "You've used the public bath a few times, haven't you, Lord Harts?"

"Y-Yes...!"

"I'll leave you to orient your people to it, then... But I need you to keep a gag order on this facility until Tahara tells you to lift it. I don't want to rock the

market just yet,” the Demon Lord said, quoting Tahara almost verbatim. To him, water was simply something that came out of a faucet or a well, and this definitive difference between how their two worlds valued water would persist for the foreseeable future. The Demon Lord always kept his own world at the center of his actions, intending to overwrite anything about this world that was inconducive to his vision. Water was a minuscule issue in the grand scheme of things.

On the other hand, Harts was fully aware of the incredible blessing the facility would be to his fortress. “Of course. I shall never forget all of the consideration you’ve shown us,” he said, secretly panicking over how he’d explain this place to his people. If he were to tell them that the bath meant an infinite supply of water (hot *and* cold), they could very well throw him right back into bed rest. He already had some explaining to do when it came to his reconciliation with the Madam and her noble faction.

“I shall see you again soon,” the Demon Lord announced. “Let’s go, Kondo.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

The two of them vanished, and the courtyard became animated as if frozen time had thawed. Their confusion was understandable, given the Demon Lord had appeared and vanished out of nowhere, leaving behind the bizarre building.

“Lord Harts...? What was that...?”

“What is this weird building?! Is it magical?”

“Look at that smoke coming out of the roof! Is it on fire?!”

“I-I understand your dismay,” Harts called to them. “Just— Remain calm as I explain things, one by one...” Harts was nearly disheartened by the questions but noticed that every one of them was filthy, something he would never have paid mind to before.

In these parts, his people had obtained drinking water from the very occasional rain and more common blizzards that stormed the area. They didn’t have the luxury of regular laundry or even bathing every day. In fact, the village of Rabbi was the only place in Holylight with such luxuries. *We will never have to worry about water again... They’ll be overjoyed.* Despite his concern on how

to explain everything, Harts decided to enjoy the celebration for the time being.

Next up... The Demon Lord had Quick Traveled to Suneo. Since all of his actions were interpreted to have much more meaning than they really did, he decided to tour the places he had been to in the past. *I remember eating here with Yukikaze and Mikan... It seems so long ago*, he reminisced, standing before La France, a popular inn and restaurant. *It wouldn't hurt to check in... I don't want to miss anything later on.*

When the Demon Lord walked through the door, the owner came flying out of the kitchen. Talk of the events in their capital had spread throughout Suneo, and here came the very person at the center of the story.

"You're the Demon Lord!" The owner greeted him. "Yukikaze and Mikan aren't with you?"

"Not at the moment. Anything strange happen since?" The Demon Lord asked, slyly trying to gain information everywhere he went to keep Tahara from discovering his ignorance.

"Did anything happen?! Thanks to you, our capital is still standing! I heard you blew up a Tzardom mock angel! Is that for real?!"

The owner garnered the attention of the patrons, who began talking and congregating around the Demon Lord, eager to hear the story straight from the horse's mouth.

"As I've explained before, I only took out the hunk of metal that stood in my way. It's not a big deal." In fact, he almost felt offended by how big of a deal everyone was making of him removing a giant piece of trash from the road. Of course, the Demon Lord's sentiment went unnoticed as the crowd became even more animated.

"A hunk of metal... You serious?!"

"Damn it, Mikan! How'd you come across this guy?!"

"Hey, man! Want to join our party? We got a sweet gig."

The Demon Lord turned to escape the growing crowd to find some familiar faces: a group of miners he had seen here before. As the Demon Lord silently

approached the miners, they stood between him and the giant man sitting in the corner.

“I’ve seen you before in passing. Did you make it back to the mines?”

The miners seemed rattled, their expressions turned bitter. Soon, the man sitting in the back boomed, “What’s it to do with you? I don’t know why anyone calls you a hero; you’re just a lackey for that coward of a king!” The man was not only large in stature, but also built like a mountain or pro wrestler.

The Demon Lord rather regretted coming up to them, but it was too late to turn around now. “Sorry to disappoint, but I have nothing to do with this country.”

“You have nothing to do with us, but you risk your life fighting the Tzardom? That’s a laugh.” The man stood face to face with the Demon Lord when another man interrupted, his stature lanky by contrast. “Calm down, Jai An. Raise a hand against him and we could lose the entire mountain.”

“We have to do something...! Am I wrong, Honekawa?!”

“It’s not going to do us any good picking fights with a kingsman!”

As they argued, the Demon Lord had to make sure he hadn’t misheard their oddly recognizable names. “There seems to be a misunderstanding,” he said. “I wanted to offer you a job, if you’re available.” The Demon Lord wasn’t blowing smoke. Considering how many areas he was going to set up, as well as the mines waiting for him in the west, he figured that this group of miners could be immediately useful. With barely any connections to speak of in this world, he was willing to take anything he could get.

Jai An lowered his voice, raising his brow at the offer. “A job? Where?” He seemed to be hurting for work.

“Holylight. If you guys have what it takes, I’ll put you in my mountain.”

“I get it. The coward wants us out of his country. You want to go?!”

“Hold on, Jai An!” Honekawa interrupted. “There’s a bunch of mines in western and southern Holylight. It’s worth hearing him out. We have to do something, right?”

“Honekawa! You expect to play into that coward’s hand?!”

As their argument escalated, the Demon Lord took a seat and lit a cigarette. Kondo had turned on his Stealth Stance, shifting his attention to his video game.

Eventually, Jai An seemed to be over the argument, as he dropped back down onto his chair and glared at the Demon Lord. “I’m done trying to guess at this and that. If the coward wants us out, I’m willing to take the deal... On one condition.”

“Which is?”

“Let’s settle this with muscle, man to man. Simple,” Jai An taunted, pointing at his log-sized bicep.

The Demon Lord was nearly outraged; this was like being assaulted by a pro wrestler on the street. *Get out of here, muscle-for-brains! Go fistfight a silverback or the Rock or something!*

Taking the Demon Lord’s silence for fear, Jai An wore a carnivorous grin. In the harsh environment of the mines, disputes were settled by brute strength at times. Titles and bloodlines meant nothing in the mountains.

“I’m not going to clobber you to death. We’ll play by the coward’s rules.” Jai An set his right elbow on the table, in the traditional pose of arm wrestling, used in this contest between men for ages. The miners cheered at the apparently familiar turn of events.

However, Honekawa alone shook his head in annoyance. “Come on, Jai An. You’re trying to break his hand again. Haven’t you done enough damage?”

“Shut up. The strong lead the weak in the mountains.”

Tired of it all, the Demon Lord moved his arm onto the table, already knowing the end result. “I have to warn you... You’re incredibly reckless challenging me to an arm wrestle.”

“Ha! The hero who saved the capital, you mean? Let’s find out what you’re really made of, royal dog!”

“Enough chatter.”

“Ha ha ha! Your funeral! *Rrraaghhh!*”

Jai An expected an easy victory, but the Demon Lord's arm didn't budge an inch. In fact, he still breezily held his cigarette in his left hand. As their leader's face turned beet-red, the miners began to whisper. No ruffian, decorated knight, or famous mercenary had ever bested Jai An in a match of arm wrestling. His winning streak seemed to be on the verge of total collapse.

"How's...this...possible...?! You're...pulling...some...trick...!"

"What trick is there in a contest of strength? Stop making excuses for yourself..." The Demon Lord boasted, but being the final boss was quite the trick indeed. To show off, he slipped a finger free, poking against Jai An's palm. With that single finger, he stopped Jai An's full strength, pushing his arm and entire body back.

The chair and table flew as the Demon Lord enjoyed his cigarette, acting as if nothing had happened. Jai An and his miners were speechless after witnessing this unbelievable defeat.

"The strong lead the weak, you said? I'm a stickler for rules, so you'll be following me from now on. No need to worry. If you are competent workers, I'll guarantee you jobs." The Demon Lord handed the astounded Honekawa a business card and left the inn. Kondo followed, his eyes still glued to his console and unaware of anything that transpired in the building.

Honekawa blankly stared at the paper before finally reading the text on it and being completely nonplussed by the inscription. *What is this, some kind of code...? Or a noble custom? But more importantly...!* He rushed to Jai An still frozen on the ground, staring up at the ceiling as if he was sleeping with his eyes open.

"Are you all right, Jai An?!"

"I lost...? I... He only used a finger...!"

"Snap out of it! We'd be living on the streets without you!"

Jai An spotted the piece of paper in Honekawa's hand and muttered the bizarre writing on it aloud: "Hakuto Kunai, Secretary — Department of Citizen Happiness Management."

After leaving the inn, the Demon Lord and Kondo observed the capital of Suneo from above, assessing the damage. Restoration had already begun, but the scars carved by an Ancient Devil and mock angel were still vivid on the cityscape.

“This is where you and Tahara massacred all those people... That’s berserk, sir.”

“You’re misunderstanding. We’re the ones who pacified the situation,” the Demon Lord jumped to defend his honor from Kondo, who evidently thought him to be some murder machine. “Take in this city too, just in case. Who knows where the next battlefield will be.”

“Yes, sir... Panorama View.” With his ability, Kondo began taking in the entirety of the capital as he began running his stylus across his tablet. Almost without thinking, he was digitalizing the visual data of the capital as if he was 3-D scanning. “Memorized. I’ll complete the process in my room.”

“Good work.”

Kondo had the ability to memorize anything he saw as if he filmed it with a camera. Elated by the Demon Lord’s compliment, Kondo began walking with the tablet behind his back. “Mister Secretary, I like turning things into data.”

“Into data, huh...? Spoken like a kid of your generation,” the Demon Lord said, admitting how old that made him sound.

“But I don’t want this world to be just 0s and 1s...” Kondo added, stopping the Demon Lord in his tracks.

The old world ruled by the Empire was exactly that: 0s and 1s.

“It won’t be. We’re rebuilding the world,” the Demon Lord patted Kondo on the head and Quick Traveled once more.

They arrived at an expansive forest near the divine realm.

“Th-This is incredible... Do elves live in this forest?!” Kondo asked.

“I’ve heard that they do... But I have not personally met them.”

“They’re a staple. Are we going to burn down the elven forest and sell them off to slave traders or the orcs?” Kondo asked, grinning for some reason. It was

clear how skewed his conception of elves was.

“Why would that ever be necessary...?”

“Don’t be coy, sir. Even I know how to deal with elves. Nine times out of ten, they’re sex slaves or breeding pods for orcs and goblins! Or are you going to take them into your *harem*, sir? You’ve already stained that dark elf with—”

“Settle down, Kondo!”

“Ah! I’m sorry, sir! I didn’t mean to interfere with the vision of your elf-breeding farm!”

“When did I ever mention anything like that...?!” The Demon Lord facepalmed, seeing that his effort to detach himself from the cruel dictator image was entirely futile.

“All right, sir, I’ll relinquish my secret design of a... That’s weird.”

“What’s going on?”

“Something’s off with my vision... Like pixelations in a XXX game or the mysterious white fog or light that covers up the important stuff in hentai...”

“Can you describe it like a normal human being?”

Just as Kondo attempted to do so, an explanation came from above, speaking directly into their minds. *Trying to get a peep of my shrine...? You really need to discipline your henchmen better.*

“Whoa! Mister Secretary, sir! Did you hear that cougar that sounds like a secret nympho?”

To reiterate my point... You’ll make a fine sacrifice on my altar, boy. The voice belonged to the grand priestess of the shrine.

Hearing this, the Demon Lord began approaching the spot where he remembered the shrine to be. “Perfect timing. I have some questions for you. Wait here, Kondo.”

“Wait, sir! The elves will capture me and turn me into a sperm tank! Their libidos are off the charts! Nowadays, the orcs are milked dry and beg them to —!”

“Shut up. And read a normal book once in a while.” The Demon Lord continued walking until the space before him distorted, revealing an impressive shinto shrine. Despite having only visited the shrine for the first time recently, he was awash with terrible nostalgia.

“You came back, Evil Face! Must have been lonely without any friends!”

“And before you ask, we’ll never be your friends either!”

The juvenile foxes came trotting out with their usual comments, but the Demon Lord simply smiled; he had too much to do today.

“We apparently both have discipline issues. Go eat this and be quiet, you brats.” The Demon Lord created a Fried Bean Curd, a Stamina-healing item that was once found in the Six Realm Shrine in the game. The development team (rather obsessed with Japanese theological architecture) had created this area with insane detail.

“D-Don’t think we’ll take handouts from you, Evil Face! You must want to be our friend really bad... Deee-nied!”

“Yeah, you think you can bribe us?!”

The pair of foxes barked, but their tails were wagging.

“What better offering for foxes?” the Demon Lord said. “Apparently it was fried rat back in the old days.”

“Rat?!”

“Brother! I think he’s mocking us or something!”

Unfazed, the Demon Lord shoved the plated food in their faces. The kids’ eyes lit up, their ears twitching in anticipation.

“H-Hmph... I might be gracious enough to accept a humble *offering*...”

“Our palates are too refined for anything you have to offer, Evil Face!”

“If you say so, you little brats...” The Demon Lord chuckled and went deeper into the shrine. The main shrine came into view after walking through a few gates and torii, when an excited shout (“It’s delicious!”) from the distance made him stifle his laughter.

A woman awaited him within the main shrine, wearing a shinto priestess's dress that showed a large portion of her cleavage. She had fox ears on her head as the little ones did, but he couldn't spot a tail.



“We finally meet, Grand Priestess. Need an introduction?”

“No, Demon Lord. I owe you my thanks. You’ve taken care of that troublesome Belphegor on top of keeping Kale out of our realm.”

This was exactly what the Demon Lord wanted to hear, but he didn’t show a glimpse of his excitement. He only took his shoes off at the door and entered the shrine, smoothly sliding over a cushion as he took a seat.

“I wouldn’t mind seeing a token of your gratitude.”

“A token... Interesting. What do you want of me?” The Great Priestess asked, anticipation glimmering in her eyes, for some reason. She seemed enthralled with the Demon Lord’s every word and move.

“It seems you’re a powerful figure in this country. Can you command your kin to stay away from the fortress on the border?”

“Hm? The one in the so-called Republic?”

“Yes. Can you?”

“What are you... What a bore. Is your face the only thing scary about you?”

“Leave my face out of this! If you can, put that decree in writing.”

“Boring... *Someone’s* going to be disappointed...”

“I didn’t ask for those expectations...”

The Grand Priestess continued to grumble as she took an ink brush and ran it across a sheet of washi, then stamped her seal on it. The paper read: *Not interested in a mere human. Be gone.*

“How is this crap any sort of decree?! Get on with it!”

“Fine, fine. If it’ll shut you up...” The inscription *Stay away from the fortress on the border*, was added to the paper, making it functional at last. While this was far less intricate than an official contract, it was a victory for the Demon Lord considering his relationship with the Anima thus far.

“And you seemed to know the Still Angel.” The Demon Lord had broached the

real topic he wanted to address. He set down his ashtray and lit a cigarette. "Tell me more about it."

Seeing this, the Grand Priestess stuffed her tobacco pipe and leisurely lit it. "More? It is a fallen angel, as the rumors suggest."

"I don't understand. It was a normal angel before?" The Demon Lord considered this, recalling how the Still Angel said it "used to be white."

Seeing this, the Grand Priestess began cackling with joy. "*You're* the one who brazenly goes by the name Lucifer. Who should know fallen angels better than you?"

"That's a matter of— I have my reasons to... Anyway! The Still Angel was the one who summoned me. If there's anything you know, I'd like you to tell me."

"Summoned, you say? Why has she done such a thing...?"

"Apparently, it wishes for chaos and destruction in this world." The Demon Lord glanced down at the Satan's Ring on his finger. The gauge, whatever it was quantifying, had steadily been filling, its aura more insidious than before.

"A fallen angel, indeed... She kept granting the wishes of the weak until she destroyed herself. A pure, single-minded, foolish girl," the Grand Priestess described with some emotion, but the Demon Lord wasn't interested. He was looking for specifics.

"If I grant her wish, will I return to my old world?"

"Your old world...?"

The Demon Lord regretted letting this slip, but that Grand Priestess's interest seemed piqued as she came closer and closer, until they could nearly kiss.

"Why are you so close...?" grunted the Demon Lord. "Get away from me."

"What do you know, and what do you remember...? I do sense about you another protection, an incredible blessing... Nay, a miracle." Her gaze slithered all over the Demon Lord's face, before she finally rested her chin on his shoulder and gave him a taunting look.

"Blessing? Hate to tell you, but I believe in no god."

The Demon Lord turned his nose up, but the Grand Priestess wrapped herself around his arm and pulled him close, her eyes strangely enlarged.

“Besides, I feel a *world* from you... The power to create an entire world, or at least part of one. And...the scent of the enemy. For some reason, you’ve carried it with you.” She pushed the Demon Lord to the ground, her eyes burning with love and hatred, and straddled him in a dangerously seductive situation.

“What do you think you’re doing...?! Get off of me!”

“I want to keep you.”

“Huh?”

“Why don’t you spend a millennium with me in the divine realm? I want to keep you here; I’ve never been more intrigued by a man.”

“What do you think I am, some beetle?!” The Demon Lord rushed to his feet and turned to leave the main shrine.

The Grand Priestess, however, leaped onto his back. “You’re not...going anywhere...”

“Gah!” The Demon Lord shook the priestess off of his back and hightailed it out of the shrine, leaving only the crisp sunlight and the pleasant chirping of birds.

“He got away...” the Grand Priestess said to herself and licked her lips. “But that body was something else.” She stared out the exit as if she longed for an escaped prey.

A clear voice rang in the shrine; the Dragonborn, the true ruler of Animania. “What was the meaning of that, Ninetails? Don’t shove that filth in my face.”

“Peeping again? Can’t get him out of your mind, can you, Tatsu?”

“Shut up,” the Dragonborn snipped. “Who was he, anyway?”

The Grand Priestess simply replied “A vanguard... No, an Invader blessed by the Still and Ember Angels...”

Tatsu was speechless. The priestess gazed in the direction of the Demon Lord’s departure once more. While he was long gone now, an intense aura was

left behind.

There was another thing the priestess had noticed during their meeting, but she kept that fact to herself. Otherwise, she was sure it would only indeed cause chaos and destruction.

Whether her decision would prove to be correct or not, only time could tell.

What was that, a scene from Misery?! the Demon Lord smoldered. *That fox wanted to lock me up!* Having barely escaped her clutches, he bolted out of the shrine and returned to Kondo who awaited him with quaking legs, like a newborn fawn.

“How could you, sir?! Leaving me alone in an elven forest! If they had been the *man-eating* variety, I would have been milked dry like a mummy!”

I was the one who almost got eaten in there! The Demon Lord kept this to himself and took a look around them, then ordering rather briskly, “Work’s done for the day, Kondo. Go back to the village.”

“For real?! Yeeeeeeees! I can be a full-time, work-at-home, professional daydreamer!”

Daydreamer my ass! You’re just a bum!

With a beaming salute, Kondo vanished.

The Demon Lord Quick Traveled too, looking exhausted. His destination, however, was the city of Rookie. His main objective here was making contact with the paladin, but he thought to check in on Yukikaze and Mikan, whom he had parted with after taking care of the Invasion.

The city of Rookie was now host to a wide variety of workers that were able to snag positions in the restoration effort, but there were still a great many people who were out of work. No one was guaranteed a job either.

“Wonder if I’ll get something tomorrow...”

“Good attitude gets you higher on the list. Look, the foreman’s out keeping score again.”

“The bastard just picks kiss asses day after day.”

“It’s...too much to bear...”

Most of them spent their days complaining about the current state of affairs. After the shutdown of the Bastille Dungeon, the city’s economy was all but dead since all of its business was targeted at adventurers bound for the dungeon.

While restoration was technically underway, the Republic was neither eager nor generous when it came to its funding. In fact, the Republic had already forsaken the city, saddling the Demon Lord with the whole thing. The residents were sure to riot if they were to find this out.

“Our only saving grace is Mikan. Just being around her boosts my mood.”

“And that tan skin! That gets me.”

“She’s...too hot...”

Mikan was the type to be well-liked by both men and women, while Yukikaze (who was next to Mikan) garnered obsessive popularity among men.

“Ugh... I want to dungeon crawl with Yuki.”

“With your abilities? Only in your dreams. Just be happy we can see her alabaster skin.”

“She’s...too pale...”

“You keep saying the same thing, man...”

Mikan was rapidly clearing debris and giving out instructions to those around her, while Yukikaze held her staff aloft, spreading cold air throughout the area. Her staff was embedded with a Snow Crystal (also known as Nevermelting Ice), which allowed her to lower the temperature with minimal Stamina expenditure.

“...I haven’t seen Mister Fox in so long... Crying emoji,” said Yukikaze.

“What the hell is an emoji?” Mikan answered. “Get some work done, will you?!”

“...Waterfalls from my eyes emoji.”

“Knock it off with the nonsense!”

There was quite the contrast between them, with Mikan busily running to and

fro and Yukikaze standing completely still.

“It’s hot...! I’m drenched in sweat already. Yukikaze, could you cast Cleansing Light?”

“...I don’t have infinite Stamina. You should wait until after work.”

“You have a point, but it must be hard loafing around while I do the work, huh?!”

“...Hard? Keep your mind out of the gutter. It’s only noon.”

“Have you gotten those ears of yours checked yet?!”

Out of the blue, the Demon Lord appeared before them. Yukikaze immediately cast Cleansing Light upon herself.

“What happened to waiting?!” Mikan barked.

“...Mister Fox comes before all else.”

“Talk about a two-faced thing to do!”

“...What kinds of things are you thinking about two faces doing? In the gutter again...”

Mikan tried to pounce on Yukikaze, but the Demon Lord stopped her. Upon noticing the Demon Lord, the workers around them began whispering amongst themselves, as it was rumored that he was the one who stopped the Invasion.

“So that’s the Demon Lord of Holylight...”

“He’s the one who burned a hydra to a crisp?!”

“He’s...too scary...”

The Demon Lord’s arrival had completely halted the restoration work, but even the foreman could do nothing but anxiously wait; he didn’t dare tell the Demon Lord to get out of the way for fear of a fiery death. In contrast, both Mikan and Yukikaze were free-spirited enough around him to make the crowd nervous.

“You’re in the way! What are you doing here anyway?!”

“...Or is it *who*, Mister Fox?”

“You two haven’t changed... It’s sort of relieving, in a way,” the Demon Lord said and produced a map from his pocket. It vaguely outlined the continent but still had many blank spaces.

Yukikaze slyly wrapped her arm around the Demon Lord’s. “...Planning the honeymoon, Mister Fox?”

“What’s with the ridiculousness right off the bat?”

Mikan joined them in peering at the map but soon shook her head. “What sort of map is this? It’s barely labeled and pretty old...”

“...Mister Fox, borders in the north flip-flop depending on how the wars are going.”

“I see. What do you know about Euritheis?”

The girls exchanged a look. Apparently, they didn’t have pleasant memories about the place.

“There’s lots of trade, and it’s usually where adventurers go once they make it through their rookie phase. But...”

“But what?”

“It has a dark side,” Mikan frowned.

It sounded like Euritheis was going to be a difficult country for the Demon Lord to maneuver himself through, but after the meeting with his advisors, he couldn’t avoid it.

“...There’s a dungeon there called Blue Bricks where one-star adventurers crawl. It has a colosseum and plenty of underground gambling. Narcotics are sold on the streets and slaves are sold in broad daylight,” Yukikaze explained in an unusually elaborate way.

“Their capital’s filled with traps to fit these adventurers into a mold. Bunch of crime syndicates too.”

“Sounds like a troublesome country. This one up here sounds peaceful: Milk.”

Mikan violently shook her head to deny the Demon Lord’s quick judgment. Contrary to its name, Milk was home to a fierce horse-riding tribe. “What are

you talking about?! Those guys are always invading somewhere, setting any settlements they attack on fire, and taking whatever loot and civilians they want! They're a bunch of punks!"

"...A mountain range splits Milk in half, with vast plains on either side." Yukikaze took out her Magic Pen and scribbled in the mountains and plains on the map. As a seasoned adventurer, she seemed to be familiar with the geography of most countries.

"Here's the Timeline Plain," Mikan pointed out. "A bunch of groups within Milk fight for territory here."

"The grass is only greener, I suppose."

"Huh? Of course grass is green."

"I don't mean... Whatever. And the upper half?"

"The Tweeterland Plain."

"Those aren't normal names for places, are they?! Who came up with these?!"

"Huh?! What isn't normal is your brain!" Mikan barked back, nonplussed by the Demon Lord's reservations with a perfectly normal name for a locale by this world's standards.

"Anyway... First things first: we have to pay a visit to Euritheis."

"Euritheis? Did I hear you right?" a voice called from the crowd, and an adventurer emerged. It was Endjoy, whom the Demon Lord had encountered in the Bastille Dungeon some time ago. He had insulted the Demon Lord's *youthful* appearance and promptly earned a pebble thrown at his gut, resulting in an explosive discharge of flatulence.

"Wouldn't do that, if I were you. You wouldn't last a day." He dismissively waved his hand, a condescending sneer across his face, clearly looking to garner the affection of Mikan, whom he fancied.

The Demon Lord, however, strained his memory to recall his last encounter with him. "You were... Endfart, was it?"

"End-joy! Don't you call me that!"

“If you want to make a lasting impression, why don’t you start going by Skunk?”

“Guess you’ve got a death wish, huh? Come to think of it, I owe you one. You’re dead meat, old man!” Endjoy charged, swinging at the Demon Lord, but Yukikaze breezily swung her staff, generating a magical gust that blew Endjoy away.

“...Social Distance, dodged flatulence.”

“Endjoy, it was? Go and quarantine yourself from life.”

As Yukikaze and the Demon Lord fired these one-liners, Endjoy rose to his feet again, his face bright red with rage. He was a decently skilled adventurer, but this was no contest. “Goddammit... So you’re headed to Euri, huh? We’re going to settle this there, once and for all!” Endjoy shouted and ran off, indignant.

Mikan sighed with her fists on her waist. Yukikaze muttered, “...He came back here because he became penniless in Euri.”

“Got it... That’s why he’s been here for so long.”

“...Tit? Mister Fox—”

“Not what I said.” As quickly as he shut down Yukikaze’s R-rated comment, the Demon Lord moved to leave.

Yukikaze tightly clasped his sleeve. “...Don’t forget, Mister Fox. You promised you’d sleep next to me.”

A ‘promise’ that was practically forced upon the Demon Lord after he broke his previous promise of dinner, but considering that both Yukikaze and Mikan were hard at work restoring the city, he’d feel too guilty blowing her off again.

“If...I can find...the time...”

“...Not a problem. I’ll coordinate. We have to come together.”

“What are you going on about?” the Demon Lord groaned, then handed Mikan a coin.

Her eyes widened. “Wha—?! This is a gold medallion!”

“For your troubles. Keep an eye on this city for a while.”

“For my— Are you serious?!”

The Demon Lord simply waved his hand and turned to leave, ready to tackle the daunting task of facing the paladin.

Yukikaze called to him for a parting shot. “...Mister Fox?”

“What is it?”

“...There’s no parole from love.”

“What am I even charged with?!”

After the Demon Lord’s departure, the restoration site finally began to move again. The Demon Lord made his way through the city, the majority of which was bustling with construction projects. The paladin was among the workers, carrying materials at times and giving directions at others. He was acting like a foreman.

The Demon Lord concealed himself through Stealth Stance and watched Weeb work with enduring interest. *What a weird guy. Why is he always so eager to help others?*

Even the Trinary that served Weeb, each of them notable knights in their own right, gave directions or carried rubble with their bare hands. Cheers and laughter followed Weeb wherever he went, as if he was effortlessly emanating the feeling of a bright future.

I’ve seen plenty of nonprofit volunteers and donation panhandlers on the streets... the Demon Lord thought. Each time he realized that the celebrity in charge of the so-called charitable cause lived in a mansion and drove expensive cars, it discouraged him from taking any part in fundraisers. He always suspected that selling a few expensive cars would have saved the lives of many more people than begging passersby for pocket change. Of course, this wasn’t a very altruistic outlook, but he wondered if more people shared his philosophy than he had thought before.

And there he is. Not only always leading by example but paying out of his own pocket... Despite his status in his home country declining due to his obsession with helping the needy abroad, Weeb never showed so much as a second thought for his rescue efforts. There were always a few outliers in any society,

but not many would risk their livelihood to consistently help others. The Demon Lord was enthralled by this man, who believed in and acted upon his own convictions above all else.

“We’re close to break time,” Weeb called to his fellow workers. “Let’s keep up the good work!”

“Yes, sir!” the crowd answered, then continued cheering each other on as they worked. Even children followed Weeb, carrying what little debris they could.

“I want to help!”

“Look, Sir Weeb! I can carry this big rock all by myself!”

“Wonderful, everyone. I’d better try and keep up!” Weeb went to lift a particularly large boulder but apparently failed. He chuckled and turned to the children for help, keeping up the act. “Now this rock is a bit too heavy for me to lift alone. Do you think you can help me?”

“Yeah, I can do it!”

“Come on, Sir Weeb!”

“What are you going to do without us?”

The children swarmed around the rock, and Weeb managed to lift the boulder with ease. The crowd, children and adults alike, burst into cheer.

“W-Wow!”

“That’s amazing, Sir Weeb! Can you teach me how to do that?!”

“He got a power boost, thanks to me.”

Such a wholesome scene drew laughter from the adults, even healing the tired hearts of the workers.

Weeb was a picture-perfect hero, kindling courage amidst a city brought to ruin.

Lunch break came for them soon enough, with hot food brought in from the campsite outside of the city. Much of the menu was nutritional dishes like oatmeal, bean and chicken soup, and sheep’s milk cheese.

“Let’s have lunch, everyone,” called Weeb. “We can’t work on empty stomachs.”

“Thank you!” The workers chowed down on these dishes, groaning about how delicious they were.

Weeb had hired a rations team out of pocket and even brought them to battlefields. There were plenty of so-called master tacticians in the world, but most of them would have ignored some of the practical aspects without a second thought. In contrast, Weeb prioritized this above almost anything else, always making sure to feed his men no matter how perilous the battlefield was. For working-class soldiers, the promise of a hot meal meant more than tactical strength. It seemed Weeb was a cunning general too.

Once the paladin finished his food, the Demon Lord showed himself. “Are you going to grind your life away for strangers...?”

The workers cowered at his sudden appearance, and the Trinary leapt to stand between him and Weeb in an admirable display of loyalty. The Demon Lord produced an item from the dark void and tossed it to the paladin, which the Trinary could not react to in time.

“What is this...?” Weeb asked.

“It will heal your Stamina.”

The Demon Lord had given him a Towerade, Scallion Girl Edition; this was a splendid item that recovered 40 Stamina. As soon as Weeb saw the illustration of Scallion Girl on the label, a mysterious sensation shot through him like a bolt of lightning, which he barely managed to contain.

“Sir Weeb, there is no need to risk consuming such a bizarre concoction.”

“Indeed. Look how cloudy the liquid is.”

“Apparently he doesn’t know that no poison will affect Sir Weeb.”

In fact, the box on Weeb’s back protected him from any and all poison, on top of always purifying him. Perhaps the maker of the box knew that many a hero had fallen to poisoned food.

“You can simply twist the top open,” the Demon Lord said.

“Thank you...” Weeb took a drink of the beverage as the Trinary protested and was immediately awestruck by its sweetness and unbelievable healing power. “I...feel weightless!” Weeb had been starting to feel the wear and tear of leading the restoration day after day, but just a little of this beverage had washed all of his tiredness away. As the Trinary protested even louder, Weeb simply held out the plastic bottle to them. “It’s not poisonous. This revitalizes you.”

The Trinary let out a collective sigh of relief, which only lasted for a fleeting moment. Now the trio was overcome with a different sort of tension. They glared at each other as if they were locked in deadly combat. Kaiya, their leader, took the bottle with a quivering hand, but didn’t dare bring it to his lips; the other two would have snapped his arm without hesitation. While the paladin and the Demon Lord had detached themselves from the commotion and began conversing, the duel of the Trinary had just begun... And each of them was willing to risk their life in this battle.

“I was the one who took it. That much can’t be denied.”

“It means nothing. You simply happened to be standing the closest.”

“Neither of you filth deserve to share a beverage with Sir Weeb! Sooner would the continent freeze over!”

They knew that if one engaged another, the remaining of the three could swoop in to take the ultimate treasure for himself.

“Rock, paper, scissors. Fair and square.”

“Erm...”

“I will *not* engage in a contest of dumb luck!”

As the Trinary became deadlocked, the Demon Lord and paladin were free to continue their conversation. Inadvertently, they had succeeded in keeping the troublesome and time-wasting trio away from them.

“Where do you plan to go after leaving this city?” the Demon Lord asked.

“To other Northern Nations, as I’ve planned—”

“Come to Rabbi!” the Demon Lord demanded so forcefully that Weeb could

make no reply. “Behold the world of my creation. You won’t regret it.”

“I remember asking you this before... Do you plan to rule the night once more and stand against the Great Light?”

“I’ve heard an earful about the goddess and divine punishment and whatnot... Now what?” The Demon Lord laughed. The Grand Priestess and Weeb were one and the same in his eyes, blind zealots to whatever entity they projected divinity onto. “The Great Light? That’s more moronic than a fool’s pipe dream. If such a *grand* deity existed, why would you ever need to toil away? Why wouldn’t this ‘Light’ save the poor with a miracle or two?”

“Well...”

“I perform miracles in the here and now. You can be a part of these miracles; outside of any trickery or legends.” Those words were like dark magic, beguiling those who heard them to chaos and madness, wreaking havoc on their morality and religious dogma that they had thought to be indestructible. At long last, Weeb beheld the Fallen Angel Lucifer as a tangible entity who stood before him. Just as was the case with White, the myth had become reality. “Any entity that brings no quantifiable benefit to this world but demands worship and money in return is a petty thief or con artist. They do nothing but harm the inhabitants of this world!”

“Wha—?! That’s too...” Weeb stood shaken by the Demon Lord’s exclamation. He had known of the rivalry between the Great Light and Lucifer but had not expected the Demon Lord to have such a visceral reaction; it was painfully clear that reconciliation was off the table. If the Great Light were to ever manifest itself in the world, Weeb had hoped to stand between the Light and the Demon Lord to mediate the mending of their adversity. He believed their reconciliation would become the catalyst to reshape the continent in its entirety.

“What have I done, on the other hand? Without asking for any devotion in return, I have tangibly improved the lives of the people,” the Demon Lord began twisting his words in an attempt to convince Weeb. He had simply acted however he pleased, but the benefit he brought to the world was undeniable, so the Demon Lord was going to exaggerate his actions as much as possible and

use them to his advantage.

“I defended the Holy City against an insurrection and crushed the Invasion in this city. I saved the capital of Suneo from ruination and rescued the enslaved from Hellion territory, taking them into my own village as refugees. Has the Light done anything of the sort?” The fact that all of those accomplishments were brought by coincidence or Tahara’s scheming did not stop this con man from weaving a tall tale out of them. Unfortunately for Weeb, these accomplishments (however accidental) remained irrefutable. “I would not describe myself as virtuous, but I do promise to bring progress to this world through the creation of mine... Unlike a certain entity that might as well be taking a thousand-year nap.”

Weeb had no retort to this, simply tightening his fists. Indeed, the Light had vanished long ago, not showing a single trace of its existence.

“And one more thing,” the Demon Lord added, “One of my subordinates has acquired this city. No need for you to toil away here anymore.”

Weeb caught onto the deal that must have taken place behind the scenes; it was nothing unusual among the Northern Nations where borders constantly shifted. He proclaimed proudly, “Who the city belongs to matters not to its people. I work for them, not for you or any other ruler!”

The Demon Lord felt himself smirk. Weeb sounded just like the hero of a movie or comic book. It was becoming comical at this point. “Don’t make this difficult...” he said. “Leave this place to my people. Just come to the village, already.” Without waiting for an answer, the Demon Lord turned away.

Despite his egotistical demeanor, Weeb couldn’t bring himself to hate the Fallen Angel who spoke with such pride and conviction. The Demon Lord was faithfully devoted to his own actions without hesitation... Despite them being polar opposites, Weeb and the Demon Lord seemed to have something in common.

Ren Miyaoji

After leaving Weeb, the Demon Lord entered a dilapidated chapel that stood in an empty section of town, away from any people; the perfect location for an advisor summoning. The interior had been destroyed by the Invasion, vivid scorch marks left on the walls and ceiling. Perhaps the townspeople were hesitant to tear down a chapel despite the damage.

Finally, the day has come... I wonder how Ren will react.

Ren Miyaoji was a girl whom the Demon Lord would have described as his best advisor. During the over a decade of the game's existence, he had devoted blind love to this character. Everything from her creation and backstory to her skill set and stats were a product of overt favoritism. She had it all: looks, status, brains, strength... All without having to earn any of it.

Pretty crazy character I made... The Demon Lord reminisced about the past and Ren's characterization. The girl, despite her icy disposition, was kinder than any other character. Her birth came with a bizarre destiny, resulting in her being placed in the Upper House, a facility reserved for noble-born children under unfortunate circumstances. For Ren, this felt like nothing short of abandonment.

The Miyaoji house at the time had no heir. The pressure slowly drove the lady of the house into hysterics. Meanwhile, Ren was conceived between the lord of the house and one of his concubines. His wife went mad with rage, attempting to kill the concubine and the unborn Ren. The lord managed to secure his concubine and unborn child in a distant location where his wife could not reach them.

The child was born shortly thereafter and placed into the Empire-run Upper House for her own safety. Despite being born into an imperial bloodline, her existence was wiped from all records. This tragic backstory had aided in

garnering Ren's popularity among the players.

It's straight from a soap opera, now that I think about it... It was too much, the Demon Lord grumbled, but Ren's tribulations were far from over.

Lady Miyaoji had continued to hunt down Ren's mother, finally capturing her and strangling her to death; the only person who knew Ren's true identity and the only person who ever loved her had been taken from her.

Her graduation from the Upper House was not attended by any members of the Miyaoji family, but a strange man in a long, black coat had come to see her. Hakuto Kunai had recognized Ren's exceptional talent and come to recruit her.

In exchange, in a voice as cold as ice, Ren asked for him to kill Lady Miyaoji.

Kunai simply nodded and granted her wish. With her contract signed in blood, she joined the department of Citizen Happiness Management. After her existence had been wiped from all records, she stepped out into the limelight. Ren might have considered that day her true birthday. The duality of Ren being a player's worst nightmare and a tragic heroine had earned her undisputed popularity.

"The last one I saw was you, that day..." The Demon Lord closed his eyes in reminiscence.

With the uprising of popular social media networks, numerous independently run websites had been swallowed up by a flood. Of course, Akira Ono's world was no exception. Akira had sworn an oath to Ren that he would rise again, but it would take years for him to accomplish this.

I finally get to see you again... Whenever the Demon Lord summoned an advisor, he was always met with a dose of nervousness and a powerful sense of elation. Today, however, he was overcome with only excitement. For fifteen years, Akira Ono had devoted himself to her, which was longer than many even provided love for their spouse or family.

Ren spent more time at Kunai's side than anyone else... I have to be careful. She was Kunai's secretary and bodyguard, never leaving his side. She alone had spent much more time with Kunai than any other advisor. Any small discrepancy could give him away. *I want to at least get along with Ren. No, I*

have to make it happen... His relationship with Ren could very well decide the future of his endeavors in this world.

With determination, the Demon Lord brought up the admin screen. It now illuminated her name; the sight alone made the Demon Lord's heart skip a beat. Steadying himself, he searched his surroundings for any signs of life before finally commencing the summoning.

"Ren, come hither to my presence...!"

The familiar pillars of white and black materialized before the Demon Lord. When they converged, a familiar girl was left standing there: utter perfection. Everything down to each individual strand of her hair shone with a remarkable glow. Her small but dignified stature prevented most from even approaching her, her ice-cold expression betraying the allure of her traditional Japanese beauty.



She was far too special to Akira Ono. Straightening his back more than necessary, the Demon Lord called to Ren with vigor. "Thank you for coming, Ren."

"You've summoned me, Master...? What?"

"Wh-What's wrong...?" The Demon Lord was quickly dismayed at Ren's reaction. While she was grateful towards Kunai, she never felt any affection for him. In fact, she felt strong revulsion towards the cruelty he wrought upon the world of the Empire through his Game. Considering that fact, the Demon Lord feared if he had made a misstep in meeting Ren one-on-one. "I understand, Ren. We are no longer in our original world, rather—"

"I finally get to meet you...my true master."

The Demon Lord froze for a moment before the realization of what her comment meant struck him. He felt his mind go blank. "Y-You must be confused. Let me explain things one at a—"

"I've wanted to meet you for so long...Akira Ono."

No, no, no, no, no! His own name tightly bound the Demon Lord in place. Even after making it through all sorts of impossible situations with his guts, bluffing, and con artist manipulation tactics, he had never expected this. *Calm down... Panic and I'll only drown faster...* Above all else, the Demon Lord never gave up. He deliberately took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it.

"I know this is sudden, Ren. Have you forgotten my name?"

"I have not forgotten. How could I...ever forget?"

The Demon Lord was dizzied by her icy look, and her dark eyes seemed to see right through him. Simply standing opposite from her made him feel overwhelmed by her exquisite grace, which existed where he could never reach... The air was heavy. Her every word rang with sophistication that seemed to straighten his back and awaken the slumbering cells in his body.

"I won't repeat myself. My name is Kuna—"

"You speak of another person, with another name. *You* are my true master."

“Snap out of it, Ren... We don’t have all day.”

“An existence I have felt from the moment I was born... A great love that envelops everything that I am, a magnificent entity filled with compassion for my entire existence... Everything I speak of, I feel it coursing from every fiber of your being.”

Her all-piercing gaze made the Demon Lord avert his eyes from hers; he couldn’t bear to meet them. For whatever reason, Ren was undeniably convinced that Akira Ono stood before her.

“I have changed my name once. You know why.” The Demon Lord slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke, brazenly dropping ash onto the chapel floor.

In fact, he had originally given the Demon Lord of the Empire his own name. He only renamed the character once he began running the game on a global scale. After it grew beyond the scope of a simple hobby, he had made the perfectly normal realization that he shouldn’t have the final boss share his full name. This was the case in the real world, and it was easy to invent an excuse for this in the world of the Empire. It would not have been strange for someone as hated as Hakuto Kunai to change his name or even his face; terrorists around the world and all of the players were constantly hunting him down.

“When the first name disappeared, I could no longer sense the great being, and the wonderful love I had always felt by my side had gone beyond the distant sky... But you’ve come back to me.” Ren approached the Demon Lord, step by step.

He exhaled once more, his mind racing to find the right next move. Ren seemed adamant not to accept any excuse, convinced without a shred of doubt that he was Akira Ono.

“What do you... How much do you know?” The Demon Lord braced himself and finally met Ren’s eyes. He let out another long puff of smoke as he dusted off a half-crumbled pew and sat on it. His question was an admission of Ren’s claim as well as a gambit.

“I don’t understand anything... Except that your love was my only reason to live through all of the hardships in my life.” Ren had been gifted with skills beyond belief, but her upbringing was tragic.

Although her backstory served as the foundation of what made her character unique and complete, there was no denying that Akira was the one who had invented and then made Ren experience those tribulations. All artists would have done the same, of course, but now his creations stood before him with their own free wills.

“What if I told you that I created all of those hardships in your life?” The Demon Lord’s question was sneaky, in the sense that Ren could have taken this as Kunai speaking, since he was so intertwined with her being, having recruited her to a world of cruelty she never wanted to be a part of. However, in the truer sense, he had created not just her story, but the only world she had ever known. For better or worse, he was the cause of it all, and the Demon Lord had spoken as much with a certain degree of conviction.

Still, Ren’s expression remained unchanged. “You...are my everything.” At last, she was close enough for the Demon Lord to reach out and touch her. This should have been a terrifying realization, but he was overwhelmed with a bizarre sense of relief. The very fact that Ren was physically near him gave him an irrefutable sense of omnipotence.

Before he was completely drowned in the comforting sensation, the Demon Lord closed his eyes tight and forced his mouth open.

“That’s...a conversation for another day. There are plenty of things about this world I need to explain to you.” He went on to tell her how he came to this world and what had happened since then, speaking in a manner much less grandiose than before. This time, he never met Ren’s eyes or spoke with any real conviction. Ren simply listened without showing any reaction. Time passed in the old chapel, where only the Demon Lord’s voice and the faint sounds of the outside world could be heard.

What would a bystander make of a man clad in all black conversing with a graceful girl in a black, sailor-style uniform? The Demon Lord had recounted the same tale, which he could now recite without preparation or pause... But it omitted an important truth: the existence of Akira Ono.

“You’ve faced many challenges, Master. But please don’t trouble yourself anymore. From this point on, I will be your shield and your sword.”

The Demon Lord grunted in acknowledgment. Appearing in another world should have warranted a reaction worthy of a literally world-changing event, but Ren seemed completely unbothered. She reverted the subject of their conversation to the previous one. “Why are you pretending to be *him*, Master? Do the others simply not know your name? Perhaps you are hiding your identity because you feel some suspicion towards the other members...”

“W-Wait... Stop, Ren.” The Demon Lord wanted to shut down at the onslaught of these questions, but his brain continued to work for once. He presumed that, after receiving his devotion for fifteen years, Ren had become something more than the other advisors. Even to him, Ren had always been special. She was the heroine and face of the Game, an impenetrable being; even her record was unmatched—the MMO had shut down before Ren had suffered a single loss. Even on that fateful night in 2016 when the Sleepless Castle fell, Ren stood fighting until the end.

Ren rapidly continued with her same expression, as if she were speaking to herself, “There are some members of the party whom I wouldn’t trust, even those who are downright dangerous, in fact. I think you’re right to be cautious, Master.”

The Demon Lord immediately knew who Ren was talking about. Yu was acting peacefully now, but she was extremely dangerous by nature. He didn’t even want to imagine facing off against Tahara’s brain. That being said, he couldn’t afford for Ren and Yu (whose relationship was already strained back in the Empire) to deteriorate further, lest his entire team crumble to the ground.

“The advisors serve me well; no one bears any ill intentions towards me.”

“That’s because...you are our true master.”

The Demon Lord finally looked up at this, beholding Ren’s perfect face with eyes that seemed to swallow the world. She looked beautiful down to every eyelash, and it finally hit the Demon Lord that the creation of such a being was an unforgivable sin.

“There may come a time when I tell you many more things... But we will not speak of this until then. Not a word to the others.”

Ren remained silent for some time, driving the Demon Lord mad. Finally, she

slowly spoke. “Understood... But when we’re alone, I will call you by your real name.”

“What?”

Ren continued, “And the others might already suspect something. Otherwise, I find it hard to believe that all of the party members are following you without question for so long. His method is an oppressive rule through fear and violence, the complete opposite of what you are trying to accomplish here, Master.”

The Demon Lord snubbed out his cigarette only to immediately light another; he was going overboard. He began to sense that, since Ren had spent more time with Kunai than anyone else, her knowledge on these things was closer to his own. “I was going to bring you back to the village for introductions,” he said, “but I’ll take you up north straight away. There’s more I want to show you about this world.”

“Venturing outside with you, Master...is a dream come true.” The advisors spent their lives in the Sleepless Castle for the most part, and they were rarely permitted to leave the premises.

“We’re not going on a field trip...”

Ren, who rarely changed her expression, wore a smile. The subtle change knocked the wind out of the Demon Lord’s sails. He cleared his throat and stood to escape the sensation.

Ren pursued; she held out her arms and spoke. “Here... Welcome home, Master.”

“E-Erm...” The Demon Lord slowly approached as if was being physically drawn in. When he was close enough, Ren gently wrapped her arms around his waist. Her shoulders twitched, nearly imperceptibly, before she closed her eyes in relief.

“I knew you would return to me one day...” she said, clearly directed at Akira.

What am I going to do...?! Completely lost, he simply gazed up at the ceiling of the chapel and scratched his head.

Ren Miyaoji

Race: Human — Age: 16

Weapon Ningen Mukotsu

A dreadful spear that pierces all. Its blade renders all armor useless. Facing Ren spells certain death. Numerous effects attached. Infinite durability.

Armor Dance of the Cherry Blossom

It closely resembles a sailor-style school uniform but boasts an extremely high defense. Its form changes in battle. Infinite durability.

Item World Queller

A national treasure bestowed upon the Miyaoji family by the imperial family. Protects the wearer from all curses and unworldly threats. It was given to Ren by her father, whom she hated, so she'd always wanted to destroy the item. In this world, its effects are incredibly amplified. The item rejects any wearer who does not belong to the Miyaoji family and provides no protections to said wearer.

Level: 1 — HP: 20000/20000 — Stamina: 600/600 — Attack: 88 (+50+x) — Defense: 94 (+50) — Dexterity: 83 — Magic: 0 — Magic Defense: Off the Charts (Endless Nine)

Equipped Skills: First: **Flicker** Second: **Point Break** Third: **Outcry**

Combat Skills: **Fake Out, Intimidate, Lock-On, One-Shot Kill, Go Easy, Devotion, Ruler, Hammer Smash, High-and-Mighty, Hunter, Demon Spawn, Avenger, Critical Striker, Strategist, Mind's Eye, Overlord, Obliterate, Equal to None, Limit Breaker, Second to None, Break Through**

Survival Skills: **Worship, Emotion Control, Deadpan, Bandage, Seamstress, Taste Test, Neutralize Poison, Recover, Fighting Spirit, Charm, Integrity, Breaker of Evil, Cooking, Medicine, Resistance, Meditate, Drum Up Courage**

Duel Skills: **Gotta Kill Them All, Thousand Blooms, One-Person Army, Sky Ruler**

Special Abilities: **Dictator of Law, Assault Queller, etc.**

The Final Boss Approaches!

The Demon Lord had boarded a large carriage in the city of Rookie and was now riding down the travel road. Unsure of what Ren might say upon arriving in Rabbi, he had decided to keep her to himself for a while. There were many other carriages around the Demon Lord's, a mix of elaborate personal carriages and simpler public transports, with a group of adventurers encircling them all.

Bandits were not a rare occurrence along the dark travel roads of the Northern Nations; at times, entire battalions fled losing wars and turned to robbing travelers, so all transportation was done in caravans of a certain size. Guards were assigned to all public carriages, as well as those of the wealthy, their price fluctuating drastically depending on the number and skill of the guards.

"Do you really need any bodyguard other than me, Master?"

"Don't dismiss the idea too quickly. It's worth experiencing things that may seem unnecessary on the surface in order to gain a deeper understanding of this world. There may come a time, for example, when I would want to hire these guards for some reason."

"As you wish, Akira."

The Demon Lord, who had been reclining in the carriage seat ever so luxuriously, began choking on his own saliva at Ren referring to him by his real name.

"What is the meaning in calling me that, Ren? It's completely pointless and unnecessary."

"It is neither pointless nor unnecessary," Ren retorted, as if the matter had already been decided.

The Demon Lord failed to find the words to respond. Ren had an incredibly

stubborn side when it came to certain things. To paint her in a positive light, she was dedicated, even pure. On the flip side, she would butt heads severely with anyone who let raw efficiency govern their actions.

“We’ll have a good long talk about that another day... I’m going to rest my eyes for a bit.”

The carriage had also just come to a stop for the driving horses to have a break. The Demon Lord stripped his jacket and laid down onto a cot.

Ren swiftly sat on the same cot, gently lifting his head onto her lap. “I will protect your cranium, Master.”

“Cranium...” The Demon Lord was forced to hold back laughter at the uniquely Ren choice of words. At the same time, he saw in her eyes that she was dead set on her proposition, and once again would not take no for an answer. The Demon Lord relinquished, resting his head on her lap.

“Are you comfortable, Master?”

“It’s not so bad...” the Demon Lord mustered as he felt peace and contentment seeping into his brain, fresh air that smelled like cherry blossoms in full bloom filling his lungs. Her armor, Dance of the Cherry Blossom, contributed to this effect, but Ren herself exuded an aura that reminded him of cherry blossoms.

She gently stroked his hair and at times his cheek. Just as the Demon Lord was beginning to drift off in soporific bliss, a knock at the window made him raise his brow; he assumed one of the guards was delivering him a message.

“You can open it. What’s the matter?”

A middle-aged adventurer poked his unremarkable face through the window. “Whoa, looks like you’re having a nice ride... Didn’t mean to intrude.” The adventurer gave a slimy grin. “Your strange clothes caught my eye. That’s what they call a ‘suit’ up in the City States, right?”

“The City States, huh? What do you want?”

“No need to give me the death stare... You’re scary enough as it is. If you’re looking to do business in Euri, I have a piece of information you’ll be interested

in buying. Ignorance can get you killed up there.”

Still resting his head in Ren’s lap, the Demon Lord produced a silver coin from his pocket and deftly flicked it straight into the adventurer’s palm.

“Big money in the house! A silver right off the bat. You might just have what it takes. How much do you know about Euri?”

“I’ll hear everything you have to say about it.”

“All right then, let’s have a nice little chat for the rest of the trip, shall we?”

The man went on to provide cursory information about the nation of Euritheis, which mostly corroborated what Yukikaze and Mikan had told him, but gathering intel from multiple sources helped boost its accuracy. The Demon Lord tried to press for details, but the man suddenly clammed up, staring drowsily ahead in a gesture which seemed to request further payment. With the flick of another silver coin, the Demon Lord pried his mouth open.

“You’re the best customer I’ve had in a while. You’re not a run-of-the-mill trader, are you...? What kind of business are you looking to start up there?”

“I’m the one asking questions.”

“Heh heh... Good point. I’ll happily talk your ears off.”

After a number of detailed questions, the Demon Lord dismissed the adventurer, satisfied. The man closed the carriage window with a grin and made his way towards the other high-end carriages. Apparently, he had a side hustle of selling information during his guard shifts.

“He’s got thick skin, for better or worse.”

“Yes...”

“Hm? What’s the matter, Ren?”

“Nothing at all.” A pearly smile spread across Ren’s face, who was visibly overcome with bliss.

In fact, she felt as if she was floating in a pool of liquid that threatened to melt her away; she was so entranced that she wished for time to freeze.

“We need to stay out of trouble when we get there.”

“The Jack of All Trades, it was called? The company that runs the country.” Ren had apparently processed all of the shared information despite her ecstasy, her hand still continuing to tenderly stroke the Demon Lord’s hair.

“Looks like they pay off their central government and military too.”

“They sound like the mafia.”

The Demon Lord furrowed his brow at hearing this. Tahara had mentioned that this company was the one who had “stolen their cargo.” If the Demon Lord had any choice in the matter, he wanted to have nothing to do with them. He had no interest in said cargo, nor did he ever claim it as his.

“Our objective is to acquire a magical item that will protect against magic in the dungeon. No need to get involved with the likes of them.”

Seeing the Demon Lord close his eyes, Ren covered him with a blanket, wrapped another around herself, and shut her eyes as well. “Master... I am incredibly happy right now.”

“G-Good...”

This scene made the pair come across as if they were a couple in their honeymoon phase. A coachman peeked into the carriage and silently scowled.

The carriage started again, en route to Euritheis, where dirty deeds were done dirt cheap and young dreamers flocked, aspiring to emulate the lucky few who’d struck gold. Naturally, most who knocked on its door were taken advantage of and made to learn the lessons of the North the hard way. Worst of all, under the protection of the Jack of All Trades, evil ruled in the streets of Euritheis.

And now, a pair of final bosses were on their way, an ominous omen for anyone involved.

——Border gate of Euritheis.

Oblivious of the approaching catastrophe, the entrance to Euritheis was bustling with traders, adventurers, and other travelers, some of them even napping on makeshift picnic blankets.

“Another day of traffic, Eyze?”

“There’s been a lot of commotion around here lately...” Eyze gave a thoughtful gaze at the horde of people at the gate. Not only had they entered war season, but there had been two disasters nearby in rapid succession: a large-scale Invasion had struck the Republic, and a catastrophic event had left the capital of Suneo in near ruin. It was only natural that Euritheis was met with an influx of asylum seekers.

“We’re stable, for better or worse,” the first guard said.

“It’s a one-man rule here. Guess they thought that’d be less messy than the alternative.” Eyze twirled a blade of grass he held between his teeth. He could vaguely sense some sort of conflict approaching Euritheis.

Concerned, the guard asked, “Why the long face, Eyze? Something wrong?”

“I’ve been thinking of that cargo we apparently nicked.”

“The one the mercenaries had a whole parade about?”

Jack of All Trades had forcefully pilfered the Tzardom bishop’s cargo that had been abandoned in Suneo. As a relatively weak nation, Suneo had no option but to accept this outcome, but Eyze couldn’t help but feel that this fiasco wasn’t over.

“Why’d the guys who finished the fight leave that cargo behind?” he asked. “Who would just walk away from a pile of treasure?”

“Um... They didn’t realize it was there?”

“*And* the ship that was piled high with it? No one would be dumb enough to miss that.”

Ironically, the guard’s guess had been spot on.

“Th-Then, maybe they feared repercussions from the Tzardom...”

“They cut off anyone who screws up in foreign land. You saw the slaves. The Tzardom can’t claim money that dirty, at least not openly.”

Jack had ordered the robbery for that very reason. Eyze might have also considered the fact that the majority of Trance on the ship had been trafficked

by Jack to begin with.

“Speaking of the mercenaries...they were so cool, weren’t they?! I wish I could be like them!”

“Sure, kid...”

“The Five Stars, were they? I wonder what they *eat*. They could get any girl they wanted, I bet. I’m jealous...” The guard rambled on.

Eyze had mixed feelings about the Five Stars. Before he landed himself on meager guard duty, he had been a member of the mercenary group. Ever since his departure, Eyze felt miserable every time news of the Five Stars’ accomplishments reached him. *Sixteen years already...* he thought. *And I’ve been here wasting away.* While his old comrades became the leading force of the best mercenary team on the continent, Eyze had spent his life in the shadows, away from the limelight. When his old team had returned after completing a top-tier gig for *the* Jack of All Trades company, Eyze made sure to keep out of sight. He could not have tolerated being seen like this.

“Just you watch, Eyze. I’ll make it big like them one day!”

“Oh yeah...? Best of luck, kid.” Just as Eyze chuckled, he heard a voice in his ear—one that he never wanted to hear.

“It *is* you, Eyze. Been a while, huh?”

Eyze turned around to find one of the chief members of the Five Stars. He cracked a stiff grin and wiped the sweat from his brow. The man had snuck up on Eyze without being noticed.

“I thought I recognized one of the guards before. Had a feeling it was you.”

“Y-Yeah... Good to see you, Lilus...”

The young guard’s face lit up as he realized that Eyze knew one of the very heroes they were speaking of.

“Why didn’t you tell me, Eyze?! You guys *know* each other?!”

“N-No, I...”

Seeing Eyze trail off and stare at the ground, Lilus’s lips curled into a smirk. He

was a man with spiky green hair clad in top-tier armor, a nasty gleam in his eyes. “Come on, Eyze, you don’t tell your friends about us? We’re all from the same village, you know. He was one of the *founding members* of the group. You can brag now, Eyze.”

“I don’t...”

“After all the crap you put us through... We can all laugh about that now. So, what’ve you been up to nowadays? Watch duty, by the looks of it.” Lilus looked Eyze over from head to toe and snickered. Sensing the storm to come, the rookie guard stood silent and still, abandoning his bubbly disposition.

“Watching graves would suit you better. You *see death*, right? I can’t even count how many times we bought that nonsense... Huh, Eyze?” Lilus burst into laughter, then abruptly stopped as he slugged Eyze in the face, causing him to fly into the crowd. “I told you never to show your sorry ass again. Don’t tell me you became a gatewatch to try and weasel your way back into the group?!”

“N-No... I’ve been working here for years... *Rragh!*”

Paying no mind to Eyze’s explanation, Lilus kicked him in the stomach. The seemingly ordinary blow left a large dent in Eyze’s steel armor.

“We busted our asses to get this far, unlike *you*, who’s got nothing better to do than tuck your tail between your legs. Don’t you dare spew crap like we *know each other*, got it?”

As the muttering of the crowd grew louder, a man with more delicate features arrived, straddling a gigantic horse.

“Now, now...” called Ignatio, leader of the Five Stars. “Starting another scuffle, Lilus? You’re hopeless... Oh? Is that Eyze?” Ignatio’s eyes widened at the sight of the panting Eyze. He seemed stunned for a moment at the sudden reunion, but soon understood the situation upon noticing Eyze’s nosebleed and dented armor. “Hey, Lilus? We’re under Jack’s employment for the time being; you remember that, right? You can’t go beating up a little gatewatch.”

“Heh! Don’t think you can treat me like any old fighter.”

Hearing the conversation of those that were once his friends, Eyze silently wiped the blood from his nose. There was nothing to say. He was steeping in

shame, realizing how much he had fallen behind despite starting at the same place as them. He wanted to disappear into thin air.

Ignatio spoke in a nonchalant tone, in contrast to Lilus's brutality. "Didn't think I'd see you working here. Let's grab a meal some time, Eyze, if we can make our schedules work. We've been invited to the palace, so we're a bit busy right now. I'll contact you again." Ignatio smiled and prodded his horse to move.

Lilus glared at Eyze and gave a condescending scoff before following his leader away.

Once they were gone, the crowd began to talk.

"So that's the leader of those mercenaries..."

"I heard the Five Stars can take on most armies around here."

"That Lilus made a guest appearance at the colosseum and stabbed all the monsters to death."

"If Jack's keeping them around, no one could possibly take him down..."

"Damn it... How long are we going to let that bastard run this country?!"

Away from the commotion of the gate, Eyze was wiping his face with a wet cloth. He ran his hand along the dented armor, thinking about how it was now useless.

"Ar-Are you all right, Eyze?"

"Sorry, kid. Not one of my best moments, huh...?" Eyze tried to laugh, but his face remained stiff. He felt even worse knowing that the guard was searching for words to console him with. "It kind of bites when your old friends get too famous..." He managed to force out a chuckle.

"I'm sorry, Eyze. I don't know what to say."

"Don't sweat it. They worked hard and made it to the top. I just fell off the ladder somewhere and hit the bottom." With a self-deprecating scoff, Eyze managed to labor his armor off. Most of his best cigars, which he kept tucked away in there, had been crushed, save for one. "At least that's something..."

"Eyze..."

“Just like he said, we were a bunch of guys at this village with no jobs and nothing to lose: second-born and third-born sons to farmers, so we became mercenaries.”

This world provided few options for young men with no farm to inherit and no connections, education, or money. Unless they became adventurers or mercenaries, they would become bandits or worse: be forced out to sea.

“Why, um, did you quit...?” the guard asked.

“For whatever reason, I’ve always had a keen eye for death. I see stuff. It wasn’t too bad in the village, but when I went into battle...this sense of death was on everyone around me, ally and foe alike. It’s like drowning in death itself.” While not nearly as refined as Tron, Eyze had a special gift: eyes specialized in picking up death and danger.

Each time he saw death, he stopped his team and tried to change the plan. They listened at first. Who wouldn’t have when Eyze told them things like, “If we keep going, we die,” or, “We’ll lose most of our men if we push this plan”? However, there was no way for the mercenary group to make a living by continuing to run from the risk of death. Putting their lives on the line was part of the job description.

“They started to not want me around... After running from dangerous battles and situations, of course I’d get kicked out.”

“I didn’t know...”

“The funny thing is, all the guys that are leading the mercenary company overcame their deaths at every turn. They’re the real deal, unlike me.”

The core members of the Five Stars were each talented; they were all the equivalent of A-rank adventurers, which was often considered the peak of human strength. The exception to this was S-ranks, who had some source of inhuman strength. The Five Stars had overcome the deaths that Eyze foresaw and built their status from the ground up. Someone like Lilus only saw Eyze as a liar who dragged them down in combat.

“Enough about my pathetic past... Sorry, kid, I’m done for the day.” With a wave of his hand, Eyze left the gate and made his way to his blacksmith to

check in his armor, as he couldn't afford to order new gear.

"What the hell?!" exclaimed the blacksmith, "Did a monster get you, Eyze?"

"Something like that," Eyze muttered as he left the blacksmith, away from the main street and into the slums.

Brighter lights cast darker shadows, and the extravagant capital of Euritheis was no exception to the rule. There were plenty of slums in the city of Rookie, but those were inhabited by the younger generation—the literal rookies—who still had chances to start again, who still had hope for tomorrow. The slum of Euritheis breathed a different air.

More beggars and the sick... And those over there lost in the colosseum. The alleys were littered with the agonized sick, those who had lost a limb, children scavenging the trash for food, beggars, dealers of unscrupulous substances, and women of the night. It was a graveyard of broken dreams. There were no redos, no restarts, no tomorrows, no futures, and no more chances. All of those things were left in the past.

Eyze pushed through the door of a makeshift hut and ordered a cheap drink. The establishment only housed a decrepit countertop, with nothing so sophisticated as chairs or tables in sight; a rancid smell hung in the air.

"What's up, Eyze? Playing hooky this early?"

"Cut me some slack, eh? Give me the drink already."

"Coming right up! Top-shelf rum, imported from Xenobia! You've got to enjoy every drop of this one."

"Xenobia my ass. It's the same bootleg you might as well have made from trash..."

The exchange invited some laughter from the intoxicated patrons.

Strong alcohol of poor quality was the drink of choice around these parts, and they were drunk on the cheapest. Those lucky enough to win a petty bet or two were enjoying a small plate of roasted beans, pinching them one by one. Others, presumably on some sort of pay day, were enjoying a tough Great Crow steak or stewed Crazy Chicken liver. The combined stench offered a slice of

slum life. Naturally, bathing and laundering were activities of a foreign world for these people.

“Kept busting his ass, huh...? He’s right, of course...” Eyze pounded down the cheap bootleg and hissed. He seemed conflicted between admitting the merit in Lilus’s statement and refusing to be grouped in with natural-born mercenaries like them.

Eyze downed three cups of the bootleg back-to-back and produced the cigar he had been saving for a special occasion, definitely a more special occasion than this. Lighting it with a Spell Stone, he let the splendid aroma fill his lungs. Even his barmates came sniffing up to him to not miss a whiff of the cigar.

“Face death head on?” Eyze muttered to himself. “That’s not something *normal* guys can do... Goddammit...” He grunted, downing glass after glass to get drunk. His behavior wasn’t all that different from the other inhabitants of the slums, who seldom had any other escape than the drink.

Meanwhile, in the royal palace, the hulk of a man who controlled the nation was sipping on a beverage of his own. The man was, in a word, an orc: Towering stature, boulder-like build, and eyes that glimmered like an apex predator’s. Every aspect of the man seemed designed to intimidate those who faced him. The man sitting atop the *other* throne in the palace, the owner of Jack of All Trades and the ruler of all of Euri... Jack himself.

“The Tzardom’s still keeping quiet?” he asked.

The higher-ups of the Company, who all sat on the sofa across him, simply lowered their heads. They were dubbed Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts, and Spades, each of them adorned with various iterations of their namesake symbols on their clothing or skin. Three of the four men wore *North Star*-esque gear complete with spiked shoulder pads, while Hearts was dressed like a dominatrix.

Hearts spoke in a honey-sweet voice, “Patience, Big Daddy. You’ll hear about them soon enough.” Everything about Hearts was female, from his perfectly feminine voice down to his luscious, busty form. His dominatrix mask and platinum blond hair made him stand out even more among the team.

“That knave was a tough pawn to lose... No matter who takes his place, it

means less gold for us.” Said knave, of course, was the bishop of the Tzardom. He and Jack had built a tight-knit and mutually profitable pipeline for drug and human trafficking, illegal imports, bootleg booze, arms dealing, *etc.* In other words, Jack had lost his pot of gold.

Jack’s wrath had kept the suits of cards silently staring at the floor, having run out of options.

Just then, Ignatio sauntered through the door. “Another dreary day in the office, huh? Smiling has health benefits, you know.”

“Enough chatter. What about Suneo?” Jack asked, as if with a heavy stab of a dagger.

Ignatio, however, simply gave a shrug and a wink. “Nothing, really. Pretty quiet so far.”

“Then I wasted my money hiring the lot of you.”

“Now, hold on! Who knows what they’ll get up to in the future!”

Suneo itself held no respectable army of their own, but they did have the option of hiring foreign armies and powerful mercenaries. Jack had hired the Five Stars at a hefty price, just in case Suneo decided to resort to that option to avenge their reputation.

“I’m looking forward to seeing my money at work.”

“No doubt. We’re the death-defying mercenaries, remember?” Ignatio singsang, fluttering his hand.

The gesture was met by irritated glares from the suits, which Ignatio was completely unbothered by.

“We’re done here. Everybody beat it. Except you, mossback.”

The room promptly cleared out at Jack’s command, leaving only Jack himself and an old man wearing a set of grandiose armor sitting in the corner. His face featured a white mustache and beard that exuded experience and dignity. He was nearly as large as Jack, looking like a metal boulder in his armor.

“Set up defenses around the palace, mossback. I don’t expect you on the battlefield at your age.”

“Protect a palace devoid of function and authority?”

“You think I’m going to trust the commander that Xenobian whore of a chancellor sent over? Go give the king some advice on good tombstones. He’s already got one foot in the ground.”

The general simply took the remark with his arms crossed before him. He had been sent to aid Euritheis in conflicts but thus far had been practically ignored. The old general bowed at the command and turned to leave.

Jack boomed at his back, “Tell that conniving little bitch that I’ve taken most of the major tribes in Milk.” The remark was a clear threat against the chancellor of Xenobia, who aimed to use Jack to her advantage.

“How frightening...” the old general mused. “Do you intend to engage in war with us, sir?”

“You’re not worth the effort. Daedalus, the one in charge of Icaros, and I are like brothers. Once I’m done with Gorgon, I’ll wring you dry,” Jack laughed, and even the general couldn’t conceal his disdain.

The Gorgon Company was the top trader among the City States, the wallet of the continent. Meanwhile, the Daedalus company ruled the Dark City of Icaros, where all underground industries of the continent congregated. If Jack were to gain the influence of these companies, the rulers of the east and the west, he would have the power to starve out any opponent without ever going into battle. Jack wasn’t bluffing either—he was a world-class villain with the skill, brute force, and cash to make that threat a reality.

“Our nation has never forgotten our friendship with Euritheis. I sincerely hope the feeling is mutual.”

“Keep wasting your breath. I can see through anything that little punk with the fan can cook up.”

The general made no retort but simply bowed and left the room.

Now alone, Jack crooked his neck to and fro as if to test how the throne suited him. Soon, he reached for a bottle and downed a large gulp of booze.

“Rookfell, my dear, mad lion...” Jack muttered to himself, rather cryptically. If

anyone *had* been eavesdropping, almost no soul alive would have been able to decipher Jack's meaning. "Behold my pride and conquest...!" With a great flourish of his cape, Jack left the room.

The Demon Lord and Ren, a pair that was basically fire-starter personified, were fast approaching a country as perilous as a room full of dynamite. An explosion seemed inevitable, one catastrophic enough to obliterate an entire nation.

Dream On

—The capital of Euritheis.

Despite the late hour, the city gate was still flooded with public carriages and merchants arriving with their cargo. The capital truly was a sleepless city with its great influx of population. The area around the gate was illuminated with an array of Spell Stones of brilliant colors, lighting the grand entrance to the city as if it were midday.

The incoming merchants swiftly brought their cargo to be inspected by the guards. Said inspections, however, were performed by personnel with a vested interest in *not* being suspicious of just about anything, thanks to the Jack of All Trades.

“Are these drugs?”

“Very potent stuff.”

“It is *medicinal*... But it looks a bit *dangerous* to me.”

“No, sir. They’re as legit as they come.” The merchant deftly passed a leather bag to the guard, who seemed satisfied by the weight in his hand.

The guard gestured the merchant along without another word, and the carriage was granted passage into the city. All it took was a little monetary encouragement to import substances into the city. These, despite being labeled as medicinal painkillers, were bona fide narcotics, and a highly addictive and dangerous variety at that: Trance.

The next carriage was loaded with stolen goods, and the one behind it was stacked high with bootleg liquor. There were carriages now and again with legitimate merchandise aboard, but the illegal cargo became much more prevalent at night. One such arrival was a caravan of carriages full of slaves, all bound by collars and shackles.

The merchants' carriages were followed by the public transport. By the time the adventurers arrived, the sun was rising, beginning to naturally illuminate the city.

"Damn, it's hot...!"

"It stinks in here."

"It itches...! Which one of you gave me lice?!"

They had just been transported like sardines for hours on end, leaving them disgruntled at their arrival.

"We finally made it past the Rookie rank..."

"You'd think they'd treat us like human beings now."

Complain as they did, the cheapest selection of adventurers were treated worse than cattle. Horses or cows would have at least received water, feed, and a decent amount of space. The lack of care was made apparent at every step of the way.

Said adventurer pack was greeted by a beaming welcome party: a large group of glamorous ladies escorted by Steward, a high-ranking butler for the Jack of All Trades who wore a spectacular handlebar mustache.

As the adventurers disembarked, Steward went to theatrically scold the coachman. "You have been given *very* specific instructions to treat every adventurer brought to us with the care they deserve! What is the meaning of this?!"

"I-I'm terribly sorry, sir... There's been some sort of mistake..."

"What's the use of apologizing to me? These fine adventurers are the ones who deserve it!"

"I-I'm so sorry! Please, I grovel before you!"

The carriage driver did grovel on the ground, looking pale with guilt. The adventurers watched this with uncertainty for a moment before their faces began to contort in righteous vindication.

All of this was staged by the Jack of All Trades, of course. With the routine

performance out of the way, the butler snapped his fingers. The stunning women in his entourage brought out cool, wet towels to each and every adventurer.

With a flourishing bow, the butler formally welcomed the newcomers. “Allow me to welcome the brand new talents to Euritheis!” With that booming call, the ladies brought over chilled ale and glasses of wine, stunning the adventurers with unexpected hospitality. They were merely E-rank, after all; most of them had never experienced such a warm welcome in their lives, let alone for their adventuring talents. “On behalf of the Jack of All Trades!” Steward continued, “We have taken the liberty of arranging accommodations, room and board, for the time being.”

Confused murmurs began to rise from the adventurers, who had been treated like they were subhuman up until this point, and now they were being propped up to be shining new talents of the adventuring world. The refreshing libations certainly helped in boosting their egos too.

“W-Well, I did have a bit of a reputation in Rookie...”

“Naturally! Adventurers with a star have an *aura* about them!”

Indeed, a single star that denoted their E-rank was pinned somewhere easily visible on their clothes. While these served as a means for them to show off their graduation from Rookie status, these were also the first trophy most of them had ever earned in their lives. Even a blatantly platitudinal compliment managed to boost their self-esteem.

“And surely, such esteemed gentlemen are quite...*adventurous* in bed. Accommodations have also been made in that regard.”

“For real...?! ”

“Our business only stands on the loot adventurers bring back from the dungeons. It is in our interest to retain talented single stars such as yourselves, lest we suffer great financial loss...” The butler chuckled, in what came across as genuine concern.

With this, the adventurers guffawed, some of them uncharacteristically boasting and pounding their chests. After *the* Jack of All Trades propped them

up so thoroughly, they were beginning to fool themselves into thinking they were renowned heroes.

“I must ask that everyone verifies their identity and undergoes tests upon entry into the capital. All formalities, of course. Once that is taken care of, please feel free to enjoy your new life in this grand city!”

All single stars arriving in the city were met with this same welcome. They were housed at an extravagant manor for a few days, where every meal was exquisitely prepared for them. The men spent their evenings in bars with stunning beauties and their nights in bed with ladies of another sort. They even received invites to a grand party, hosted by the Jack of All Trades, on the last day of the stay.

This was absolutely a dream come true for all of them; in three days’ time, all men were completely entranced by their experience.

“It can’t get any better, can it...?”

“We finally made it out of that dump.”

“No duh. We’re on another level from those losers in Rookie.”

All of them couldn’t help but feel the weight of their single stars; they were now in another world.

As jubilant as ever, the men walked through the gate, laughing all the way. There was a price for passage into the city, but that, too, had been taken care of by the Jack of the All Trades. Even the guards greeted the group in formation, cheering them on the way. The adventurers dreamed of their glorious futures.

Eyze watched the commotion with a cold, hardened look. “Nothing but a bunch of lambs to the slaughter...” He was tasked with scoping out any dangerous individuals among the newcomers with his talent.

The rookie guard beside him simply asked, “Are they not going to make it...?”

“They’re all drunk with power already. They’ll be sucked bone-dry.”

The Jack of All Trades didn’t go through all of this trouble out of the kindness of their hearts, of course. The elaborate welcome was intended to get the adventurers hooked on a lavish lifestyle, leading them down the road to a

lifetime of debt.

“B-But they made it out of Rookie, didn’t they?”

“They won’t realize how little they’re worth until they get burned. Some of them won’t even know it then.”

“I-I see...”

Traffic through the gate showed no sign of stopping. As a group of female adventurers disembarked, they were approached by a group of stunning men and were met with the same welcome.

“Those ladies won’t make it either?” asked the guard.

“Nothing worth living for. They’ll end up in a brothel or fall for one of those prostitutes, maybe get addicted to Trance.” Eyze’s assessment was brutally honest.

The dreaming adventurers were destined to be ruined in this city. Those coming from the countryside seemed particularly vulnerable to the charm of the city. Even still, people flocked to Euritheis because of the public perception that there were chances for everyone here. There was a precedent for striking gold in the dungeon or building a successful business from the ground up. Those cases, however, were mostly successes manufactured by the Jack of All Trades.

“It’s kind of depressing all around, isn’t it?”

“You’ll get used to it, kid.”

As someone who struggled for years to keep up with the success of his teammates, Eyze knew when to give up and accept reality. *Booted from the mercenary group at twenty...* Eyze could feel the weight of his age on his shoulders: 36. He had spent over a decade believing that he, too, had what it took to become a hero like his former comrades. Life, of course, had another destiny for him. He spent those years barely scraping by, and before he knew it, he was at an age where he could hardly be considered young.

In fact, he was almost envious of the newcomers, if only for their ability to dream of a better tomorrow. *Dreaming will only lead to pain. It eats at your heart like venom...* Eyze relinquished himself to middle-aged resignation. These

were the thoughts that had been running through his mind since his reunion with his former teammates. *What's so wrong with giving up, anyway...? As long as you don't wish for more, you can have a decent life with what little you've got... Can't you?*

Eyze, who had been spending his days as an ordinary gatewatch, was revisited by a dream he had not seen in a long time. Out of the blue, this dream reappeared in the form of the highest-class carriage among the traffic. An incredibly graceful and beautiful girl emerged from it. One look told Eyze that everything about her was out of this world.

“Whoa... Is that a princess from somewhere?”

“She's g-g-g-g-gorgeous...! And look at that black hair!”

“Maybe the daughter of some big-name noble? Really could be a princess of a far-off land beyond the City States...”

“I think I'm in love...” the newbie guard blurted out, prompting a laugh from Eyze.

Any young man would have fallen for her, he supposed. But Eyze had lived through enough to raise his guard. The girl seemed *too* perfect.

“Hm... So, this is Euritheis.”

As a man emerged from the same carriage, Eyze fell off the rock he had been sitting on.

The man was clad in black from head to toe, a stabbing glare in his eyes. His mere presence seemed to settle the dust around him. He took out a small, white cigar and the girl swiftly lit it for him. Watching him stand there and puff smoke, Eyze was convinced that he must have been some sort of ruler of the underground.

“Damn... That's bad...!”

“Yeah, it's bad...!” the guard chimed in. “I wonder what her name is?”

“You moron! Look at the guy next to her!”

“Why would I look away from such a beautif— *Aghhh!*” he screamed, flapping his mouth like a fish out of water. Even his newfound infatuation stood no

chance against the shock of beholding this man who appeared to be the emperor of hell.

Unlike his rookie coworker, Eyze had a far more sobering vision: an endless field of the dead. Hundreds, thousands... It looked like the population of an entire nation was to be decimated.

“G-Go run a message, kid... A *bad* one just came in.”

“Wh-Who is he...?!”

“Judging by that getup, he’s from the Gorgon Company in the City States... Suneo might have sent him this way to get back at us. There’s going to be a huge clash...!”

“No...”

“Go! Now!”

The rookie guard went off sprinting and Eyze covered his face. He didn’t know what the man in black was after in the capital, just that unprecedented death surrounded him.

Eyze was reminded of a long-forgotten dream on this day: a terrible nightmare.

Fireworks

As always, the main street of the capital was bustling with a disorienting amount of foot traffic and carriages. Unlike the roads in the under-construction village of Rabbi, the streets of the capital were not wide by any means. Most settlements on the continent were designed to hold as many businesses and residents as they could within a limited space. In that sense, the remade village of Rabbi would be a huge exception to the norm.

Along the main street, a group of loan sharks had captured a pair of sisters, one of them now kicking the younger sister full force in the abdomen. The older sister, who had already tried to protect her sibling, was lying on the ground, beaten and broken. Pedestrians passed them by all the while, none of them willing to risk trouble for themselves.

“If you’re not going to pay up, we’re going to *hold on* to your little sis,” one of the loan sharks spat.

“W-Wait... Leave my sister alone! I’m the one who borrowed the money!”

“Our point exactly. You’ve got a job to do.”

She was at a loss for words thinking about the cruel prospects of her future.

“You’re going into the colosseum,” the loan shark added, much to her surprise. “That *usually* comes with pay, but you’re not seeing a single bronze coin of it. Got it?”

“Colosseum...” she muttered, her brows lifting in hope. She would be risking her life, of course, but she considered it a better alternative to strangers taking turns on her for nickels and dimes. With the overpopulation of prostitutes in the city, untrained women were often tossed to the colosseum for catfights. The Jack of All Trades constantly took people hostage over debts and set up various matches in the colosseum with them. Given that it was packed with spectators day in and day out, especially wealthy tourists flocking from

neighboring nations for big events, the colosseum provided massive income for the company in the form of gambling.

“The first fight’s against another broad neck-deep in debt. Second one’s against a real colosseum fighter, and the third is against one of our beasts. If you make it through all three alive, I’ll tear up your contract then and there.”

“A fighter and a b-beast... You can’t be serious!”

“What’s that? *You’re* the one with the serious interest racked up.”

“O-Okay... Just don’t hurt my sister anymore!”

“Now that all depends on your attitude... If you beg on your *knees*, we might think about it.” The loan sharks burst into laughter. This scene was all too familiar on these streets.

Loans from the Company were jacked up with sky-high interest rates. Nonetheless, Jack made sure that they were forced to pile on even more debts. This was the tried and true tactic: he gave the newcomers into the city a relentless assault of luxury, trapping them in financial quicksand. Alas, it was only human nature: the taste of luxury was addictive.

“On the other hand, you want to tag in that hot mama of yours? She’s still got the goods.”

“Don’t you dare! My mother is sick!”

The men laughed even louder. Seeing this turn of events, this family seemed to have been set up for this fallout from the beginning. In fact, they had not gone into debt for a temporary taste of luxury. Their father, a seasoned fisherman, had damaged his boat and had acquired debt to fix it. Interest snowballed until the father was taken away to the colosseum, followed by their mother falling ill from the stress.

Pedestrians carried on, keeping their gazes downward. Traps were laid throughout the lavish cityscape, and many who walked the streets of the capital fell all the way down the ladder into the slums before they knew it. Furthermore, the fallen received no sympathy from the residents of the city, only looks of disdain for the foolish and gullible. “That’s what you call rock bottom,” they would always say, their looks too cold to be directed at fellow

human beings. The Jack of All Trades had intentionally constructed a bottom-feeding class in the city to make the rest of the lot feel better about their lives in comparison.

The pair of final bosses traversed through the capital, drawing all eyes to them.

“Quite lavish, though the roads are narrow...”

“Be careful, Master.”

The crowds in the streets parted at Ren’s untouchably dignified aura, then promptly shook upon beholding the man behind her; whispered musings about a new higher-up in the Company or the invasion of a new syndicate buzzed through the populace.

“I’ll eventually bring Tahara to scope the place out.”

“Wonderful idea, Master.”

The Demon Lord’s casual comment would have struck the Jack of All Trades like a lightning bolt out of the blue, though he only meant to expose Tahara to different cities around the continent for reference.

“We can’t stick to the main street, Ren. We’re going over there,” the Demon Lord pointed towards the hut-lined slums.

“Into such a precarious sector?”

The Demon Lord would have never been eager to approach a slum like this, but he must have been reminded of the paladin, who worked tirelessly for the working class.

“We have to see what lies in the shadows...” the Demon Lord mumbled.

Ren’s expression softened ever so slightly. “You want to pay close attention to the poor,” she said.

“No, I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“Of course you were, Master. With how kind you are.”

Pump the brakes! he thought, as he had never so much as considered solving poverty in foreign lands. He simply wanted to experience a glimpse of what the

paladin saw in this world.

Weeb seemed to have piqued Ren's interest too.

"He sounds compassionate like you, Master."

"Don't get it twisted, Ren. I'm no saint like that guy is. I'm only ever driven by my own will and objectives."

"Is it your will then, Master, that you hold me with your great love?"

The Demon Lord halted his step. "Wait, what are you talking about?"

Ren stopped with him; their unapproachability created a gap in the crowd as if they were shooting a film.

"I always wanted to ask...why you showered me with so much love."

"The subject has completely changed, Ren. It's unrecognizable."

"No, your love hasn't changed in the slightest, Master. In fact, it feels stronger than ever now that we're closer. Even now, I feel like my heart is bursting with it."

"That's not what I'm— The topic of our conversation has—"

"If it is your will to embrace with even greater love, I will accept it with great pleasure, Master. I am yours."

"Stop it... I was only talking about investigating the slums. What are *you* talking about?!"

Despite the Demon Lord's panic, Ren spread her arms and gave him a longing look. The crowd around them gave a hushed stir at her beauty.

"Master..."

"Wh-What now...? What is it?!"

"I love you."

"Wh-What are you... There's a time and place for..."

Passersby watched the impromptu soap opera with bated breath. A stunning girl that seemed to threaten to steal their souls with her looks alone had just proudly declared her love in the middle of the street. What's more, the man she

professed her love to was quite obviously a man of the underground.

“She just said that out in the open...”

“The girl’s a knockout... Killer outfit too!”

“That godfather must have blackmailed her. Poor thing...”

“Is he from the City States? How much did he pay for a stunner like that...?!”

The crowd began to voice their own opinions, which led to the Demon Lord hastily clearing his throat and straightening his back, but any semblance of his dignity had already been lost. The Demon Lord’s face contorted terribly at this public execution.

“Guess you don’t care about your little sister now, huh?!”

For better for some and for worse for others, the loan shark’s shout had reached the Demon Lord over the now-quiet crowd. With a glint in his eye, the Demon Lord began a brisk stride towards the source of the voice, where a most foolish endeavor was being performed.

“Bet you were looking forward to it,” the loan shark continued. “Beg for my big, fat lance.”

Another of the sharks laughed. “This guy packs a *weapon* down there.”

As if to put his erect spear on display, the man wiggled it back and forth, all the way up to the woman. Despite the tears in her eyes, she defiantly stared back at him; she was ready to do whatever it took to protect her sister and mother. Passersby averted their gaze, wanting no part of the heinous deed done in broad daylight.

Now, however, there was a man who threw a wrench in the status quo of Euritheis. “A pathetic twig. Is there a competition for the most unimpressive rod in town?”

This drew a drastic reaction from the loan sharks; not even a Trance addict would have picked a fight with the Jack of All Trades in this town. This allowed the sharks to assume that they were speaking to an ignoramus from the middle of nowhere.

“Who the hell’s this idiot? Where you at?!”

“Some hick that just came into the city? Better teach him a lesson.”

Much to their surprise, the man who parted through the crowd was someone who seemed born to rule in the shadows. Even the Jack of All Trades sharks were taken aback, especially by his attire.

“Th-Those clothes... You’re from the City States...!”

“From Gorgon... Bring it on!”

“You want to take on the Jack of All Trades...? We’ll show you what for!”

“We work for Spades, punk. You don’t know what you’ve gotten yourself into!”

The Demon Lord did not respond and frowned upon seeing the child fallen by their feet. She seemed unconscious, with marks of torture inflicted by the sharks. She reminded the Demon Lord of Aku, which only made his face sterner.

Encouraged by the Demon Lord’s silence, the sharks grew louder.

“Heh heh heh! He’s quiet as a mouse now that he’s heard we work for Spades!”

“Got the look but nothing else... Don’t tell me you’re backing out now, you Gorgon dog.”

“What’s this? Did you come to give us that cutie over there? I’ll give her a taste of my fat spear too.”

The self-proclaimed fat lancer shook his hips at Ren. Seeing this, the Demon Lord produced a bronze coin from his pocket and flicked it with his thumb. The coin nailed the “fat lance” and the man let out a hideous scream, foam frothing from his mouth. He shook violently, waterfalls of tears gushing from his eyes until he eventually fell silent.

The Demon Lord had no sympathy for the shark, whose tool of the trade might have been obliterated. He laughed mockingly. “No matter the time, the screams of scum like you are so irritating to hear...” The Demon Lord thought he would lean into Kunai’s character, partially because he thought that would betray some of the extreme faith and illusions Ren regarded him with.

“You b-bastard! So Gorgon wants war, huh?!”

“You’ll regret this... The Gorgon name don’t mean shit in our country!”

“Gorgon?” The Demon Lord scoffed. “I’ve never heard of any such name...”

The sharks twisted their faces, assuming the Demon Lord was going to keep the Gorgon name out of his mouth while he caused mayhem in Euri. The Company could demand restitution from Gorgon all they wanted, only to be explained that they employed no such character with a grin across their faces. This tactic would have been moot without a skillful agent with nothing to lose. In fact, if Jack of All Trades were to later demand answers from Gorgon, the sharks calculated, Gorgon would claim slander and use that to justify a full-on war.

“All of this talk of Jack and Spades... Apparently you haven’t realized you stand before a king.”

With a boasting sneer as if he had said something clever, the Demon Lord activated one of his Combat Skills, Intimidate. The Defense of each enemy dropped by 10%, a powerful pressure pulsing from him.

The pressure caused many of the onlookers to fall and the color to drain from the sharks, a natural reaction for anyone who was looking death in the face.

“So, which maggot is going to make me *regret it*...?”

As the Demon Lord took a step forward, the Company sharks took a step back. With another two steps, the sharks withdrew three steps. Just as the Demon Lord moved to take one more step, the sharks broke formation, scuttling and carrying Fat Lance with them, leaving behind the wounded sisters and the cackling Demon Lord (now also known as “King”).

Hah ha ha! The Demon Lord thought, *Keep up the egomaniac act and Ren should snap out of it somewhat.* He continued to laugh, too scared to actually check what Ren’s face looked like. Now cackling away in joy, he had no idea of the impending clash he’d caused with the Gorgon Company.

——Jack of All Trades Company Headquarters.

A man’s panting and the moaning of women echoed in a room within the headquarters. Within were Jack and his favorite prostitutes: two among them

were actually men, as Jack was into both sides of the spectrum.

After the deed was done, Jack tossed the prostitutes out the door and lit his cigar. A well-timed knock came from the door, as if whoever was out there was waiting for Jack to finish his *business*.

Blowing out smoke, Jack simply muttered “come in,” sweat trickling down his steely body to indicate the ferocity of the deed he had just been engaged in. His body had been sculpted in battle, as Jack once climbed out of slavery all the way up to the champion of the colosseum with nothing to rely on but his fists. The smell of blood seemed to linger wherever he went. For instance, he had strangled or beaten countless prostitutes to death from getting carried away in bed.

“That newbie’s back from watch duty, Boss.”

“Got it.” Jack grabbed his jacket and left the room without turning back.

He had given orders to receive direct reports from the city gate. Jack was as sensitive to enemies on the outside as he was confident about eroding and ruling Euritheis from the inside out.

“Everyone’s here,” he remarked when he arrived at the room where his four henchmen, Ignatio, and the old general from Xenobia awaited him.

“I told you to go take a nap in the palace, mossback...”

“I’ve found my patience wanes with age. I’m afraid I can’t stay in the same place for too long,” the general casually replied.

Jack cinched his brow in frustration and the henchmen looked ready to throw insults at the old man, who seemed completely unbothered.

“Let’s hear it,” Jack simply said.

Straightening his back, the new recruit began making his report with a trembling voice. The henchmen listened intently at first but began to chuckle here and there, giving suspicious looks to the new recruit who had rattled on about the Emperor of Hell and the King of the Dead.

“You’re getting high on the job, newbie?”

“What the hell was Eyze doing?”

The henchmen continued to mutter their questions until the messenger mentioned a man wearing *a suit*, when the air in the room changed. The only people to wear suits in this world were from the City States.

Even Jack, who had remained silent thus far, crossed his arms and pondered aloud. “A guy from the City States...”

“Is Gorgon making a move?!”

“It’s too early to tell, don’t you think?”

“What’s the worst a couple of Gorgon’s men could do?”

Some more speculation continued until a group of Spades’s men ran into the room. They relayed how the man in a suit had started a fight with them on the street and scoffed at the mention of Jack of All Trades. The men who experienced the Demon Lord firsthand kept mentioning the Gorgon Company.

Jack asked, as if to double-check, “Gorgon, huh...? What did the guy say?”

“H-He kept sneering, claiming not to have heard of the Gorgon Company before.”

Hearing this, Jack’s expression shifted. Not even he had expected the Gorgon Company.

Likewise, his henchmen struggled to come up with a solution.

“Should we interrogate Gorgon, just in case?”

“You’ll just give them an excuse.”

“But if we don’t do anything, they’ll send in more agents.”

“Then our reputation goes *kaput*!”

They felt cornered. Now that they had missed the first move, they were forced to be on the defensive.

Jack finally uncrossed his arms and declared, “It’s time to send *our* idiots to them...” An eye for an eye, which was a natural course of action for them. If they didn’t retaliate, they would continue to face attack after attack. Making eloquent apologies and insincere statements like Suneo had done after the attack on their capital would do Jack of All Trades no good. If they didn’t deal

with this issue now, they believed it would run the reputation of the Company to the ground, negatively affecting Jack's rule over the country.

"What's his name? What does he look like?" Jack asked.

Spades's men mentioned the name King. It was an almost refreshing alias, but Jack assessed that it would have taken him some serious balls to declare himself that. He didn't believe that a disposable pawn would call himself such a thing.

At this point, Ignatio gave a yawn and spoke for the first time during this gathering, "You know... I'm starting to think he's *the* King from Heaven's Ward." While his tone was lethargic, the content of his remark was highly serious. Shock ran across each of the suits before they started nodding along.

"Damn it! That's what he's...!"

"*That* King, huh? He's got guts, like they say he does."

"Knocking on our door all alone... What a cute, reckless boy!"

"Heard he's a monster on the battlefield. Swords or magic won't do anything to him."

There were numerous famous mercenary groups scattered through the war-torn Northern Nations, not only the Five Stars. Heaven's Ward was one of the most infamous. They were often used as spearheads during full-on clashes, and everyone in the room had remembered that King, a valiant fighter with head-to-toe armor, belonged to Heaven's Ward.

"Who is this *King*, Ignatio?"

"Stupid strong, for sure. When King's on the other side, all of your fighters die left and right, so it's never worth it."

"Sounds annoying..." Jack grumbled. "Would he change sides for money or women? I can open up a chair on the sunny side of the government too." As fearsome as King was supposed to be, he was still a mercenary; Jack considered giving him a high-ranking position in Euritheis or even knighthood.

"No... No, no, no... Mercenaries have a code. Even if King himself is cool with it, everyone at Heaven's Ward wouldn't let it happen. He'll keep getting assassins crawling through his window for the rest of his life. So the only option

we have left is to fight him off. Oopsie!”

Jack felt the urge to clobber Ignatio’s chuckling face, but didn’t forget to check. “What if we outbid whatever Gorgon’s paying him?”

“No-can-do-sville. If a mercenary turns for money, they’ll never be trusted again, costing them their career. For example, let’s say I flip to Gorgon because he gave me lots of cash. You’d never hire us again, would you?”

“Hmph. Bet your sorry ass on it.” Jack snarled, yet couldn’t help but agree with the assessment. Mercenaries may have had the stereotype of doing anything for money, but this wasn’t always the case in practice; most of them kept honest policies and clean records. No one would hire them if any ill rumor or image arose during their background check. Most mercenaries wore a fake smile for any nation they dealt with, secretly hoping for war season to last forever.

So, this sort of attack was completely asinine. Without the name of Gorgon on his back for protection, the only fate awaiting such an infiltrator was death. King, the monster of the battlefield, must have been one of the only ones capable of such a sting.

“Heaven’s Ward, huh... Looks like Gorgon’s all riled up.” Jack could feel his blood boil. This was far beyond the previous scuffles between two trading companies; this was a war between Euritheis and the City States. He knew that the two were destined to clash, but it was far sooner and bound to be deadlier than expected.

The general, who had remained silent until now, tauntingly said, “Perhaps your savage ways have incited their ire?”

“What...?”

“Stomping into foreign territory to forcibly retrieve goods you’ve already sold off... It’s your prerogative to trample over the weak and the weaponless, but how can you expect them not to hold a grudge?”

“You think that coward in Suneo has something to do with this?”

“Just an old man’s musing he came up with while taking that nap,” he said with plenty of sarcasm, shaking his shoulders from the humor of it.

Although he was frustrated, Jack finally thought he'd made sense of why the Heaven's Ward had made such a bold move; it didn't seem conducive to a mercenary's philosophy to take on the entirety of Euritheis.

Ignatio chimed in with his nonchalant tone, "Gotcha, gotcha. Suneo was embarrassed, so they hired Heaven's Ward and put up the front of the Gorgon Company to protect themselves from retaliation. Not bad!" He snapped his fingers in a show of respect for Suneo and Gorgon's maneuver.

Jack, however, was not amused. Suneo might have approached Gorgon intending to protect themselves, but the Gorgon Company was practically drooling for a chance like this, where they could have a blank check in their pocket while they worked to eliminate their nemesis, Jack. If he stayed on the back foot, the famously strategic Gorgon Company would soon set up a stranglehold.

"Spades. Gather up everyone on your team who can handle themselves and get rid of this *King*! Send his head to Heaven's Ward and give them a good idea of who they're messing with!"

"Aye, Boss!"

"Hearts, take your reckless idiots and tear up Gorgon's territory! Let them know it was us."

"Oooh, big and flashy. I like it!"

"Clubs, you stay by the northern border and keep an eye on Milk! Diamonds, reinforce the headquarters's defenses!"

"Aye, Boss!"

The suits hurried out of their seats as Jack commanded them.

Once the four of them had left, Jack puffed out a cloud of smoke with his cigar between his teeth. "You'll regret this, Gorgon...!"

While he was taken aback by the surprise attack, Jack's fighting spirit had been lit by the knowledge of their reliance on Heaven's Ward. By nature, Jack was a fighter, and he was now ready to take out his foe with brute force.

"Shall I return to my nap?"

Jack answered the general's question with the jerk of his chin in a gesture for the general to get out of his sight. Once the general left, Jack called over Ignatio and whispered in his ear, "Keep an eye on that mossback with some of your guys."

"Really? I thought he was on our side."

"A general gift-wrapped by that vixen. Who knows what he's really here to do?" Jack even considered the possibility of the general setting the palace ablaze amidst the commotion. In fact, the general had been sent to him with five thousand soldiers in tow, but Jack had refused them all entry into the palace, save for three hundred of them. The remainder of the general's army remained outside the city boundary with nothing to do.

"Patrol the city with the rest. If there's anyone suspicious, throw them into the slammer."

"Martial law, huh? Gotcha, gotcha!"

"I don't need to remind you what happens if you screw this up, do I...?"

"Nopesies. I'm just going to work for my pay... Whoa!"

Jack had thrown a dagger at Ignatio, who had just barely managed to dodge it. In the meantime, Jack had already rushed close to him, his fist in the air. Ignatio returned by drawing his sword from his belt, blocking the punch head-on. A blast echoed through the room, and the floor below them cracked and cratered.

"Looks like you haven't lost it..."

"What was that, some sort of test?!"

"Nah, just wanted to punch your stupid face."

"That's even worse! Come on!"

Ignatio hurried out of the room before giving Jack another chance to attack him.

So, the Jack of All Trades was steadily preparing their counterattack for the upcoming war.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord, oblivious to any consequences of his actions, was en route to the residence of the two sisters he had saved, having given them each a Bottle of Water. Once he heard that the sisters lived in the slums, he figured this was the perfect opportunity to scope out the neighborhood. While the sisters had been profusely thanking the Demon Lord, he still seemed to be emulating Kunai through his cold responses.

To compensate, his secretary Ren was extracting various intel on the city. “So the Jack of All Trades holds even more influence than the rumors say.”

“Y-Yes... We’ve heard that not even the royal ministers can stand up to Jack.”

As their conversation continued, the Demon Lord kept glancing from here to there in the slums. There was a gloom about the neighborhood that betrayed the early time of day and filled the air with a particular stench. As they walked through the alleys, the residents watched Ren with a sinister grin before spotting the Demon Lord behind her and fleeing into darker alleys. Perhaps they mistook the Demon Lord to be a higher-up in the Company, or maybe they recognized his suit and sussed out a conflict in the making.

The slums have their own hierarchy as well... the Demon Lord mused as they progressed further. The more they walked, the worse the air seemed to become, as if the physical distance between a resident and the edge of the slums directly represented the difficulty for them to escape their situation. Even now, children were diving in the trash searching for anything useful, which reminded the Demon Lord of a documentary he had once seen on TV.

There were various characters in the slums, such as those handing off illicit drugs, those who had merchandise lined up on a tattered piece of fabric, children skulking to nick someone’s wallet, and those serving cheap drinks in a run-down hut.

“One mistake and you end up here. Another and you’ll tumble further down...” the Demon Lord muttered.

Ren answered with her clear voice, “Perhaps misfortune has no bottom.”

“Hmph. If they don’t like their circumstances, they can crawl out of it with their own two hands.” The Demon Lord chuckled, realizing how much he sounded like Luna. While he was far from superstitious, he could agree with

some portions of Holylight's doctrine and shared their sentiment. The fact that he would assist Luna even as he grumbled about her was because he acknowledged how far Luna had come with her own merit and respected her for it.

"Master, I believe he's involved with the Jack of All Trades."

The Demon Lord followed Ren's gaze to find an unsavory-looking man collecting coins from the makeshift street vendors; his leather pouch was filled to the brim, indicating that he had collected a respectable sum.

"Hygiene fee for the week. Pay up two bronze medallions."

"I-I can't...this week..."

"*We're* out here making sure you filth stay clean! You *can't pay?!'*"

As the man went threatening the residents of the slum, he used his fists liberally to encourage smooth payment. Despite the excuse of a *hygiene fee*, the entire place looked hardly swept. Ren glanced at the Demon Lord meaningfully, but the reply she received was cut-and-dry.

"Don't say anything, Ren. They have their own rules here. No need for us to intervene."

"Yes, Master..."

The man stopped his collection efforts as soon as he saw Ren and leapt up towards her. "A new girl in town, huh? With a face like yours, you don't need to live on the—"

At this point, the man backed off in shock upon seeing the Demon Lord and his clothes.

"Wh-What the hell...?! What's a guy from the City States doing here?!"

"Nothing in particular. Just taking a walk around the block." The Demon Lord had answered honestly, but the man, of course, didn't take it that way. With the City States sharing a border with Euri, they were long-lasting enemies that had often clashed. A member from said enemy nation *just taking a walk* was nothing short of a threat.

"One of Gorgon's pawns, huh? Leave the chick and get lost. I'll let you live."

“Let’s say I *do* leave her with you. What happens to her?”

“What do you think, punk? This one’ll be big in any brothel— Whoa!”

The Demon Lord grabbed the man by his collar without a word and threw him like a baseball. The man’s body bounced across the ground and towards the entrance of the slums. The area went so silent that one could have heard a pin drop.

“I thought we weren’t going to say anything, Master.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t said a word to them.” With his usual twisting of semantics, the Demon Lord tossed the remaining leather pouch towards the man. As usual, the Demon Lord seemed to have no use for bronze medallions. The residents of the slum only gave a longing look at the pouch, keeping their distance for fear of retaliation.

“Let’s go,” the Demon Lord urged the sisters, without so much as a second glance towards the collector.

“Uh... Um... Are you sure you want to come to our house, Mister King?”

“That’s fine,” he answered, resisting the urge to demand to know who in the world “King” was supposed to be. However, he decided to leave it alone, as he couldn’t be bothered to correct them every time. Calling him “Demon Lord” wasn’t much better of a title here.

The younger sister, too, pleaded with the Demon Lord. “Mister King...” she said with a small, childlike lisp. “Please, help daddy and mommy...”

“I only came here to observe your lifestyle. If you want help, ask that Great Light of yours.”

“Mister King... Please, Mister King...”

“Who is this *King*, anyway?! Stop calling me that stupid name!” the Demon Lord finally blurted out. He meant no ill will towards the sisters, but having them repeatedly call him King sounded to him like an insult. He had gotten used to being called the Demon Lord, but this had crossed a line somehow.

“Master. Their mother is on her sickbed.”

“Ren. Only saving those within arm’s reach is nothing but a self-serving

gesture.” While harsh, the Demon Lord had a point. What was the point of saving the one person to come across their path when thousands were starving and falling sick?

This was why the Demon Lord showed no interest in the likes of charity or volunteer work and why he felt inexplicably drawn to Weeb, who had devoted himself wholeheartedly to the poor. The Demon Lord had intended this as a harsh rejection, but Ren didn’t seem upset. In fact, she seemed more enlightened than ever. “You’re saying we’re going to save them all, Master...!”

Give me a break! the Demon Lord nearly shouted aloud from reflex alone, but happened to lose his words at how cute Ren looked with her arms crossed. Her pure aura threatened to engulf anyone who stood before her.

What’s with this devotion...? Does she think I’m some sort of saint? With a sigh, the Demon Lord pressed on, passing filthy shops and restaurants (serving who knew what in their pots). Some places were selling knickknacks on mats, while some featured women who could be seen leading men into the shadows of alleys by the sleeve.

“Oh, Mister King... This is our home.”

“Welcome, Mister King.”

I’m still being called King...!!!

A muscle twitched in the Demon Lord’s face, but he was Akira Ono, the king of the entire world, to Ren. She had no reason to deny the title. In fact, it only seemed natural to her that he should be addressed as such.

The home of the sisters was more of a hut, thrown together with scrap lumber and metal that they must have picked up off of the street, which was par for the course for residences in these alleys. Some of them even had thatched patches on the roof.

It looks like postwar Tokyo... the Demon Lord thought, recalling the black-and-white pictures of the time.

Upon entering, however, he found the hut to be more spacious than expected, with furniture and dining ware that they must have scavenged from the trash.

“I’ll examine their mother first, Master.” Ren stepped further into the hut, where intermittent coughing could be heard from the bedroom. The sisters nervously followed.

Ren was going to examine her with one of her Survival Skills, Medicine. This was an effective skill in the game that had a chance to completely heal all one’s own injuries on each turn of combat, but it did not allow them to heal others. The Demon Lord, completely ignorant of any medicinal knowledge, had never even tried to use the skill.

Looks emptier than I thought it would... The Demon Lord slumped back into a chair and brazenly appraised the place. The only impression this place gave him was the obvious one: poverty. He wondered what the paladin might have thought, but all he could imagine him doing was holding a soup kitchen. That was a practice held in modern-day Japan too. *But what’s the use of just handing out food for a day? They’d be hungry again tomorrow...* That wouldn’t cure the disease, only treat a symptom. Would it have been a waste? No, one free meal could go a long way for many people. *What if I hired them to tend the new lands we’re acquiring, or maybe the wasteland of eastern Holylight? We’ll eventually set up quarries and mines where I’ll need working hands. If I set up forests with Area Construction, I’ll need people to fell and process lumber. Whatever the job is, I’ll always need more hands.*

In contrast to Weeb, his thought process was devoid of any altruistic intentions and focused solely on how to use the downtrodden. He would not hesitate to do so if it led to his benefit, just as he had done with the Bunnies. So far, his self-centered actions had managed to save others from tragic situations, but noble ideologies played no part in his decision-making.

Soon, Ren returned with the sisters. “Master, it’s tuberculosis as far as I can tell. And both of the sisters are severely malnourished.”

Malnourishment’s really not a surprise, living in a place like this. Tuberculosis, though... Oh, right! The Demon Lord produced a vial from the scroll-shaped Item Folder: the Nine Interworld Nirvana Elixir. The Demon Lord was too afraid to drink it himself, so he was eager to hand it off to Ren.

“A cure-all designed by Yu. Give them this.”

“Yu made this...? I’m going to check its contents, Master.” Ren inspected the vial for a moment before performing a Taste Test without hesitation.

The Demon Lord could only chuckle at her complete lack of trust in Yu.

“It’s not poisonous...” she concluded.

“Yu would never give *me* poison. You can have *some* faith in her.”

“I’m afraid I can’t, Master.” Ren swiftly headed back into the bedroom.

The mother seemed to have taken the medicine, as excited voices followed:

“Mom...! You can stand!”

“Mommy woke up!”

“I don’t feel any pain... How is this possible...?”

Calling it a cure-all was no misnomer. The ridiculous item adapted to any ailment and instantly cured the user of it. The tuberculosis bacteria stood no chance against it.

Ren emerged from the bedroom again with a very subtle smile on her face.

“Your compassion has expelled her ailment, Master.”

“I haven’t done anything. Yu was the one who made it.”

“Even so, you were the one who gave it to her. If that is not great compassion, Master, I don’t know what is.”

“Ren...! I’m hungry.” Tired of Ren’s relentless glorification of him, the Demon Lord produced the Advanced Food item and handed the glowing ball of light to Ren in a forceful attempt to change the subject.

“What would you prefer, Master?”

“Hot pot.”

“Hm... Let’s go with flying fish broth.”

Ren knew many ways to use food items through her Cooking skill. The Hot Pot Set was equipped with many minute details that allowed for a variety of flavors: miso, soy sauce, kimchi, tomato soup, curry, fondue, chicken, or pork broth. It became even more versatile when combined with the Advanced Chef skill.

The ball of light flashed in Ren's hand, producing the Hot Pot Set and included dishware on the table. The Demon Lord's lips curled at the nostalgic scent of flying fish broth. The aroma drew out the sisters from the bedroom with growling stomachs and confused expressions. Their hunger, however, seemed to overpower their curiosity.

"Serve the ladies first, Ren."

"Yes, Master."

Ren prepared a tray lined with three bowls, filling them each with the soup and some of the solid ingredients before carrying it all off to the bedroom. The sisters followed as if they were sleepwalking. A hot pot dish made from this Food had the incredible property of healing 100 Stamina, enough to absolutely suplex the malnourishment out of these girls.

The Demon Lord served himself a bowl and tossed in a piece of Chinese cabbage. The broth-soaked vegetable blossomed in his mouth, and he couldn't help but grunt in approval. "It's crazy good...!" He followed this up with shiitake mushrooms, cubed tofu, and fried tofu, conquering the hot pot piece by piece, his chopsticks never taking a moment's rest. He crunched on sausages, inhaled pork slices, and stuffed his mouth with his burdock.

"I said I wanted real hot pot, but... Perfection." With nonsensical muttering, the Demon Lord produced a bottle of beer he had snagged from the casino and poured the golden ale into a glass. "No better way to start a meal..." As the ice-cold brew washed down his throat, the Demon Lord let out a comical *ahhh*. He bore an undeniable resemblance to a father of two on a Sunday afternoon.

Meanwhile, more voices could be heard from the bedroom.

"I feel so much strength... What is this dish...?"

"It is all because of my master's compassion."

"I see strength in her eyes... It's incredible... Mister King is incredible!"

"Thank you, Mister King!"

Stop! Calling! Me! King! Why won't Ren correct them?!

The Demon Lord chomped down meatballs and scallions, knocking back beer

after beer. Out of context, he just looked like an incredibly entitled slimeball slurping down food and drinking alone when he was a houseguest.

Ren eventually returned, gently took the beer bottle from the Demon Lord's hand, and replaced it with a glass, apparently requesting to pour his drink for him. The Demon Lord held his glass with a disgruntled expression as Ren deftly poured the ale into it.

"The lady seems perfectly healed."

"I see... Give the sisters the same thing. And don't forget to eat some yourself."

"You are exactly how I thought you'd be, Master."

The Demon Lord bitterly knocked his glass back, downing it in one go. Ren's fanatical trust in him seemed to only grow stronger. In earnest, he had no intention of saving anyone; he struggled to meet Ren's expectant gaze.

"Ren, you've grown to develop this illusion about me. You're dreaming if you think that's who I am."

"I don't care if it's an illusion or a dream... I love every part of you, Akira."

What the hell is this conversation?! The Demon Lord stood from his chair to put a forceful end to the topic. He feared what else Ren would say if he continued the conversation.

"I'm going to get some fresh air. Show the sisters how to eat hot pot."

With that, the Demon Lord rushed out of the hut and began to light his cigarette. Unfortunately, a man marked with spades and his henchmen came down the street—a team of Jack's goons specialized in violence.

"There you are, *King*."

"What's up, King? Thought we wouldn't be able to find you in the slums?"

The Demon Lord felt something snap as his hand slightly quivered.

"Bro, he's shaking! And he calls himself *King*! The King of Cowards, more like!"

Little did Spades and his henchmen know, the man they called King was reaching a critical level of stress, approaching imminent explosion.

The air was tense once Spades and his men had come stomping through. It wasn't an uncommon occurrence for the Jack of All Trades to perform executions in the slums, and the residents reacted like they expected another.

"Who screwed up this time...?"

"I saw it. The sisters down there took in a City States guy..."

"What the hell were they thinking?!"

"The guy in all black? A magnet for trouble..."

The bystanders spat out more curses, dreading their humble alleys becoming the battleground of some disastrous clash. They knew they could very well be wrapped up in it if it got serious enough to cause more casualties.

The elder of the slums, too, turned blue in the face upon seeing members of the Company's troupe. "Not good. Lord Spades is here himself. We're going to catch some heat too."

"Wh-What do you mean 'heat'...?"

"We'll be punished for harboring someone from the City States. They'll raise the hygiene fee, I'd expect..."

"Like we can afford that! Let's get that bastard out of here ourselves!"

The residents of the slums flooded out into the streets with old lumber, metal pipes, and rusted knives in their hands. They had to prove their disassociation with the man in black, lest the Company blame them for anything that was about to happen.

Seeing the quick response from the locals, Spades snickered. "Thought you'd be safe here, King? Sorry to disappoint you." He turned to the locals approaching him. "Whose side are you filth on?!"

The residents of the slums each desperately declared their allegiance. Falling into bad graces with the Company was a death sentence.

"We'd never protect anyone from the City States!"

"That's right! Get the hell out of here!" they shouted at the Demon Lord.

Spade curled his lips again. With the entire slum on his side, the man in black

had nowhere to run.

“If you just name-dropped Heaven’s Ward, you’d send them off with their tails between their legs. You’re in the wrong place, *King*. I don’t care if you’re Heaven’s Ward or Gorgon himself, I’ll take you on.”

The Demon Lord inhaled more smoke to quell his rage and shot a piercing glare at Spades before speaking with gravitas, “My name is—”

“You don’t get it, do you?! The Jack of All Trades ain’t reading your name tag, dumbass! There’s a scared little puppy under that armor, huh?!” Spades taunted, then began to cackle. He only saw a trembling King, either taken by surprise that the title of Heaven’s Ward didn’t do the trick or intimidated by the two-hundred-plus bruisers Spades had in tow.

“He keeps shaking, Boss.”

“The King of Loud Barks!”

“Yo, *King*! Better stop shaking and start begging for your life!”

The henchmen roared. As men who made their way through the world with violence, they knew that showing any weakness would spell the end for them. This necessitated that they ruthlessly tortured and beat down any weakened enemy. Once word got out that they tore apart a Heaven’s Ward higher-up, no one would ever defy the Company.

“I won’t repeat myself again. My name is—”

“Mister King, run!”

“Mister King!”

Damn it, you two...! The Demon Lord’s attempt at *clearing his name* had been interrupted by the sisters, who had left the hot pot to warn the Demon Lord in a display of their selfless kindness.

Spades, however, found these girls running into the scene of an impending street fight nothing short of hilarious. “What’s this?! The big bad King’s got fangirls?”

“Protected by girls...!”

“You sure he wasn’t supposed to be wearing a stuffed animal costume instead of armor?!”

“Bah ha ha! What is he, a local mascot?!”

As Spades and his party guffawed to their hearts’ content, a yellow aura emanated from the Demon Lord; his rage had reached a boiling point, and he resorted to force. The aura rapidly formed an enormous hammer in the air, stunning the sisters and sending Spades and his henchmen into a tizzy.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What the hell is that...?!”

“H-Hey! Magic Defense! Hurry... Do it, now!”

Several of the henchmen buffed their Magic Defense, while others raised their shields to the sky.

Paying them no mind, the Demon Lord unleashed the hammer as if to smite insects with lightning.

“When did I permit you scum to speak...? Obliterate.”

There was a deafening crash, followed by agonized screams from Spades’s team.

“Graaghhh! My arms! Damn it... Damn it!”

“M-My legs!”

The impact spread through the band of two hundred, triggering the Broken Bones debuff on them all, affecting various bones like their limbs, ribs, or spine, sending the entirety of them to the ground. The bone breaking, however, was merely a bonus effect of the skill. Its main threat was in its damage calculation: one-tenth of the target’s current HP. The more health the target had, the more devastating it became.

Exhaling a puff of smoke, the Demon Lord observed the collapsed men.
“Finally, some peace and quiet...”

Assaulted with blinding agony, Spades kept asking himself how their array of defensive magic had no effect on the hammer. Despite his assumption, the Demon Lord’s attack was no magic and thus was completely unimpeded by their defensive spells. None of them had any countermeasures against the

Demon Lord, who simply lived in a different world than them.

Many of the remaining residents of the slums, who had been shut in their huts from fear, timidly made their way onto the streets. They would have cheered in excitement if they could have, seeing the very symbols of their suffering groveling on the ground.

“The smallest dogs have the loudest barks...” the Demon Lord whispered importantly and basked in the cloud of smoke. That stroke of judgment befitted the title of king after all. “Let me inform you of one important detail. My name is—”

“Mister King, you’re amazing! Incredible!”

“Mister King! So cool, I wuv you!”

The sisters clung themselves to the Demon Lord, interrupting his attempt at correcting this misunderstanding yet again. While they meant well, they could not have expressed their gratitude at a worse time.

The members of the slums, who had been standing by with weapons in hand, dropped them in a domino effect, sinking to the ground.

With the pompous point of a finger, the Demon Lord summoned the elder. “Are you the leader of these parts?”

“F-Forgive us...! We had no idea how mighty a knight you were—”

“It doesn’t matter. Take this trash out to the main streets,” the Demon Lord ordered as he threw dozens of gold coins at the elder’s feet. He repeated this three times for good measure, creating a pile of gold that was extremely out of place here. “Divvy those up. And don’t forget to strip the trash of everything they’ve got. Make sure they’re buck naked before dumping them on the streets. Doodle on their faces if you want to.” The Demon Lord gave these specific and needlessly vindictive orders, which were well received by the locals.

These thugs had ruined their lives and taken loved ones from them, so the residents would have gladly slaughtered them all if they had the chance. They flocked to the pile of gold until their excitement culminated in cries.

“They’re real... Real gold coins! Long live the king!” The sentiment was echoed

by the locals as they thrust their fists into the air.

“Take that, you Company bastards! Behold the power of our king!”

“King, Savior of the Slums!”

“King! We will serve you in defeating the Jack of All Trades!”

“Tell everyone you know! Our king has risen in arms!”

“King! King! King!”

The chanting flooded the entire slums, in an almost comical 180 degree pivot in attitude, but the Demon Lord found no humor in the situation. His title had been irreversibly solidified in Euritheis, which would come as a great surprise to the real King.

“Take out the trash already, before they start to smell.” With a flourish of his coat, the Demon Lord returned to the sisters’ hut.

He had simply done so to escape the situation, but the locals couldn’t help but become mesmerized. His demeanor, his otherworldly strength, the complete disregard for the Jack of All Trades, and tossing them gold coins as if they were pocket change. Who else could he have been? After all, a sinister Demon Lord was a king of sorts.

After his exit, the locals swarmed Spades and his men, stripping them from head to toe and dragging them out onto the main streets. With an opportunity to pay back their oppressors, they couldn’t have asked for a better job anywhere on the continent.

When the Demon Lord entered the hut, he found a smiling Ren and felt an eerie feeling; he had designed Ren to seldom express her emotions.

“You *are* the bringer of hope, Master.”

“It’s an illusion, Ren. How many times do I have to tell you...?”

“What I see out there is no illusion.”

The Demon Lord turned around and saw the residents of the slums, who had all hit rock bottom, now sharing smiles. The distinctive shade had cleared from their faces, making way for a more human expression on each of them.

“Listen to me, Ren. I simply swatted some bugs.”

“Your very existence is a beacon of hope for the powerless, Master. Just as you were to me.”

“I used violence and tossed them a few coins. You call that hope?”

“Some may call you the Master of Destruction... But I believe you would destroy any master of destruction.”

Who am I, Loresia?!

The Demon Lord kept the obscure reference to himself as he saw the mother of the sisters emerge from the back, who looked to only be about thirty years old herself.

“How are you feeling, Miss?”

“I can get up and move around... All thanks to you. I don’t know how to—”

“No need. Enjoy the hot pot. A family dinner. Take it from here, Ren.”

The Demon Lord went into the bedroom and lay on the mother’s bed. He spotted a family portrait atop the dresser. *Mom, dad, and the two girls. They must have been a happy family...* As the Demon Lord was met with an uncharacteristically sentimental spell, more joyful talking could be heard from the front room. On top of healing a ridiculous amount of Stamina, the hot pot was a delicious dish in its own right.

Someone once said that hunger is the best spice, and this dinner was shaping up to be one worthy of celebrating the mother’s health.

“Mom, isn’t this meat...?”

“It looks like it...”

“Mommy, what’s this white block?”

“It’s called tofu. Very nutritious.”

“M-Miss Ren, what is this star-shaped vegetable...?”

“Those are carrots.”

“C-Carrots...?! No way! How much did this dish cost?!”

Listening in on the family dinner, the Demon Lord closed his eyes, exhausted. It looked like dealing with the dungeon and the cargo would have to wait.

Little did he know that the spark he had caused in the slums had already begun to spread fires all over the place. When he would finally make his move, those flames would threaten to burn down the entire country.

Brawl

——Near the border of the City States.

While the Demon Lord sowed chaos in the slums of Euritheis, Hearts had begun his operation to tear up a portion of Gorgon territory, starting a full-scale riot with a thousand of his fighters.

“Let’s get this show on the road!” Hearts cracked his BDSM whip to commence the infiltration. The cross-dressing dominatrix, despite his *complex* characteristics, was one of the top four of the Jack of All Trades and more than a competent fighter as such.

The news of their infiltration and disruption of Gorgon’s territory rapidly reached its leader.

“Jack, huh?”

The City States was a unique nation composed of several sovereign cities, each with their own laws, culture, palate, and more. Complex hierarchies and business arrangements formed a system among the City States where countless trading companies competed day in and day out. One of them was the Gorgon Company, AKA the City States Alpha.

“I had expected something like this from him...” Gorgon chuckled. His eyes shone as sharply and coldly as a blade of ice behind a pair of sophisticated glasses, which did nothing to mask the cruel, calculated nature he showed in his gaze. He had inherited the Gorgon Company at the young age of twenty-three, his slender stature clad in a pinstripe suit. In short, he was a racketeer. In fact, the Gorgon Company had begun as a mercenary group; they had always had a place in the underground, which they used in combination with their legitimate business to become the syndicate they were today.

“He’s earlier than expected. It seems the fall of the bishop did the trick...”

Gorgon was not surprised by his company clashing with Jack's. That much was a result of natural progression; he simply regretted the change in his intricately designed timetable that, unbeknownst to him, had been caused by the Demon Lord.

"The Jack of All Trades..." An elderly woman sitting beside Gorgon leisurely set down her cup of tea. "How frightening."

Gorgon's mansion was occupied exclusively by elderly women. Although Gorgon's appearance was striking even for men, he was a severe gerontophile, so much so that any young men or women in his vicinity would cause him anxiety and nausea.

"No need to be frightened, Catherine. The rabid dog had nowhere to run but here." Gorgon went on to patiently explain, his ruthless demeanor completely replaced with what appeared to be kindness. "To the north of Ruri lies Milk and its vast pastures. The mad dog holds no infrastructure to sneak dairy and leather products into circulation and provide merchants with them."

Such a process required passing through numerous customs checks, multiple different routes to deliver the product with access to many land and sea routes, extensive knowledge about the products, and years of experience. Even then, it would have been all wasted without trust from powerful individuals all around, in addition to the merchants. And the merchants on this continent were not so gullible as to trust the likes of Jack, who only gained his position through his fists.

"Westward lies Tartarus and warfare."

"There was a country with a weird name to the south..."

"Edogawa, you mean? Not much to be gained there other than the resorts. Not to mention the risk of sharing a border with Animania."

Raising his teacup, Gorgon pondered. East was the only direction to go. Considering all things about the other City States, their only logical course to chart was into Euritheis. With two opposing forces charging at each other, it was only a matter of time until they collided. What complicated the matter was the Demon Lord.

“But Don...”

“I told you to call me by my name when we’re alone, Catherine.”

Catherine blushed as the air in the room changed. Gorgon was not interested in any woman under the age of sixty and saw any women under that threshold as revolting.

However, more news came flooding into their intimate playroom.

“King...? From Heaven’s Ward?” A document provided by another elderly woman was inscribed with a name that had no reason to be there.

It seemed that Hearts and his men were vengefully mentioning the name as they rioted, starting rumors that members of Heaven’s Ward were participating in the attack.

“Why are *they* in our territory...” Gorgon muttered. They were a mercenary company working in the far west of the City States; they had no business meddling in a conflict here. Gorgon would have considered it too risky to attack the City States if he had been in their shoes. “They chose publicity over profit...” Gorgon’s eyes glimmered. With the shared origin as a mercenary between Gorgon’s clan and Heaven’s Ward, he felt a powerful disgust for them. “Arrogant fools...” A newly founded group had taken a swing at them, one of the best-established and long-standing mercenary companies on the continent, and this was an unbearable insult to Gorgon. “Catherine, will you tell Jake to swallow the rat whole, please?”

“I-I will...”

The cat and mouse game between the Gorgon Company and Hearts’s guerrilla team. This, of course, was only the opening act to a much larger conflict.

Meanwhile, Spades and his men had returned to Jack in a pathetic state: bones mysteriously smashed all over their bodies, as well as stripped and dumped out onto the streets naked.

Jack shouted, red with rage. “What the hell happened?!” He lifted Spades by his hair and pried his mouth open.

Spades panted, “Some...spell... Never...seen it...”

His men confirmed this, groaning in pain.

“King cast a spell...?” From what Jack had heard, King was a great warrior in combat, but no Spellcaster. What mercenary, who made their living through their reputation, would not brag about such a remarkable spell? One that could crumble two hundred elite fighters in a single swoop...

The thought of it gave Jack doubt for the first time: should he send more men to take on King? Especially after hearing that the residents of the slums had been the ones to dump Spades and his men onto the streets.

“King’s got the filth from the slums on his side...” Jack snarled.

“B-But, Boss, that riffraff won’t make a dent in the Company no matter how many King’s got on his side,” Diamond said.

Jack shook his head, exasperated by Diamond’s lack of imagination. His higher-ups were all formidable fighters, but few had much of a brain. Strategizing and decision-making were left to him alone.

“Won’t make a dent, huh...? How many do you think live in that dump, Diamonds?”

“Huh...? L-Like five hundred, probably...”

“How many years ago was that, dumbass?! Two thousand’s a low guess, their brats included.”

“B-But we could take out those skin-and-bone bastards anytime we—”

“Shut up.” Jack puffed out some cigar smoke and waved Diamonds off as if he couldn’t be bothered to explain. Jack was concerned with the large population of potential enemies within the city walls, regardless of their current threat level.

He feared no size of foreign invasion, but a potential terrorist group of two thousand lying dormant within his territory was another story. The iron defense of the capital wouldn’t help one bit when they started pillaging and destroying the city from the inside.

“Thought it was weird when he went straight for the slums... This was his plan

all along.” Jack growled at the unexpected use of strategy from whom he had considered a meathead on the battlefield. King had come alone, not out of brazen recklessness, but with a plan to make an ally out of the lowest class. *You’re making it more interesting than I thought you would, King...* As Jack realized the formidability of his foe, he was also relieved. He could understand someone capable of that kind of calculation more than he could a madman ready to charge into enemy territory solo without a thought. As a ruler, he feared an outlier: someone without rhyme or reason, who exerted senseless violence without a cause. That description more closely matched a monster than a human.

“Surround the slums, Diamonds. Don’t let a single rat out. If anyone tries to break through, kill them on the spot.”

“Aye, Boss!”

“We’ll corner King in the slums. The Five Stars will take care of him.”

With that, Jack threw on his tiger-skin gown. Shortly, he was expected to attend a ceremony at the colosseum. As a former gladiator, he was partial to attending these events, but pulling a no-show could be seen as him cowering from the attack.

“Don’t you worry, King... I’ll send what’s left of you to Heaven’s Ward.” Jack stomped out of the room and regained his composure as dictator.

With a flashy battalion as his entourage, he made his way towards the colosseum as if he was paying no mind to his conflict with Gorgon. While the citizens of the capital had mixed emotions about Jack’s appearance, none had the strength to defy him. Going against the Company would earn them a one-way ticket to the slums.

They haven’t made a crazy stir yet... Jack scoffed at the sheep who groveled to him with their eyes. When he had first arrived at the city as a slave, he was met with eyes of disdain. People had thrown rocks at him and spit in his face, as if he was an untouchable; now, the people of the city bowed down to him, chanting his name, fawning. *Stupid sheep... I’ll wring you all dry until you die.*

This was Jack’s method of revenge against Euritheis as a whole, where he had spent days of wretched hardship. As a world-class villain, his revenge had

reached an enormous scale.

The colosseum... It all started from here... As dusk approached, the colosseum came into view. He had spent his formative years here, fighting off opponents of all shapes and sizes, including humans, beasts, and even monsters, as he scrambled to survive. He often fought covered in his own blood as the audience laughed and wagered on his life. These were days of torture he didn't want to remember.

And now, every fighter and spectator is under my thumb... Jack entered the colosseum to a resplendent fanfare and was met with the particular heat of the arena, attended by gamblers and the upper class with too much time on their hands.

Fighting had always been a spectator sport throughout history with dedicated fans. In the colosseum, bets were openly made as to who would survive, expensive wine bottles being opened left and right. As fighters killed to survive, the rich and their professional escorts discussed the fighters and their predictions as if they were master fighters themselves, drinking bottles of wine each priced around the average salary of a commoner in the city. The platters of food spread before them were also strikingly lavish. It was hard to believe that the colosseum resided in the same city as the slums. The audience section of the colosseum was separated by class, and Jack made his way up to the royal box.

"Are you having fun, you dumb motherfuckers?!" His arms spread wide, Jack shouted into a microphone made from a Wind Spell Stone.

The spectators answered with fists in the air, whistling and hooting.

"What matchups you got for us today, Jack?!"

"Viva Euritheis! Get those City States bastards over here and beat them to death!"

The crowd seemed to be in support of Jack's appearance despite the rumors of conflict with the Gorgon Company. They were in a mecca of contest, after all, where only the strong were rewarded.

After sufficiently greeting the crowd, Jack gave the minister (who had already

been seated) a sharp look. The minister leapt up like a grasshopper and gave a deep bow, clearly signifying their power dynamic.

“Th-There was some commotion in—”

“None of your business. It’s taken care of.”

“B-But there are rumors of the Gorgon—”

“You’re making me repeat myself?” Jack glowered at the minister, who promptly sat back down, facing forward with his back straight and his hands on his knees. He was the only one in the entire colosseum to be seated like this.

“The dumbass is trapped in the slums. I’m taking Gorgon down in the same breath.”

“U-Understood...” The timid-looking minister agreed, pleading to the Angels and the Great Light to get him away from the rabid man as soon as possible. Perhaps it was human nature to pray to anything one could think of in times of strife, even if they had no faith in these deities in their day-to-day lives.

Seeing that Jack was seated, the master of ceremonies took over, boisterously announcing the highlight matches and tournaments for the day. At each announcement, the audience was fired up hotter and hotter, their cheers growing louder and louder.

Soon, combat commenced in every corner of the arena, filling the colosseum with bloodshed and betting. The life-or-death contest provided unparalleled entertainment for the guests.

Night fell as the matches progressed and the audience became more intoxicated. Jeers were becoming more common, and some spectators in the first-class boxes had even begun engaging in lascivious acts, making for a bloodstained festival.

Jack let out a low chuckle as he imagined his profits for the night. *Now, where to drop that Krack...? That’ll be a huge pile of gold.* The drugs left in the bishop’s cargo would prove to be a test of his business-making abilities: to circulate them in small batches or sell the entire stock at once. *Maybe I’ll just shake down Suneo for the money in exchange for handing over the cargo.* As a delicious payback for turning to Heaven’s Ward and Gorgon, he could demand

they pay a hefty sum for the stolen goods. *King should be taken care of by now... I wonder what state his body'll be in.* Imagining King slaughtered like a sewer rat in the corner of the slums, Jack raised his glass in a mocking salute.

The king himself had awakened just about the time Jack had arrived at the colosseum. Dusk had come, and dangerous tension surrounded the slums as it was locked down tight to not let a single soul out. A full-scale street war seemed imminent.

I got some sleep at least... The source of the catastrophic misunderstanding and the firestarter for all of today's events had just completed a full course of douchebaggery: eating and drinking all over someone else's house before sleeping in a lady's bed without her permission.

"Good morning, Master."

"Hm? I slept until morning...?"

"The time is five in the evening, but morning begins whenever you wake, Master."

That's ridiculous! The Demon Lord simply ordered Ren to call the sisters and closed his eyes again. He was ready to pursue his initial objective of asking questions about the dungeon.

The sisters entered. They were almost unrecognizable, with even a healthy sheen on their hair and skin. The overpowered Stamina recovery had revitalized them from head to toe.

"Mister King, thank you so much for providing my mother with such a valuable medicine... Thank you!"

"Thank you for the delicious meal, Mister King!"

"No need to thank me, but my name is *not* King. It's Hakuto Kunai. Remember it well." The Demon Lord looked relieved to have finally gotten this out.

The sisters shared a look before showing confident agreement.

"Yes, King Kunai!"

"King Kunai!"

“Wait! Get away from King, for the love of everything! You just want to call me that, don’t you?! You know what you’re doing!” The Demon Lord rambled on, but his title had already been instilled too deep in the sisters for him to correct them in any way. The sisters even seemed to feel pride in the glamorous title. “Nevermind... I’ll deal with that later. What can you tell me about the dungeon in this city?”

“The dungeon?” The older sister began to relay facts she knew about the capital’s dungeon. She mentioned there was loot to be gained from monsters, but the dungeon was not run in a very fair manner.

“Blue Bricks, huh...? Doesn’t really sound like a dungeon.”

“I used to fall for it too, but they plant rare items. Everyone loses their mind over them.”

“A plant... It’s a time-tested method, for sure.”

At this point, the Demon Lord was informed of the names of the family: Warin, the older sister; Urin, the younger sister; and Marin, the mother. These names evoked a certain pachinko machine in the Demon Lord’s mind, but he scrubbed the image from his thoughts. However, it led to an idea. “If dungeon crawling is a form of gambling, they would need to show off big wins every now and then.”

The flashing jackpot signs, the lotto winners on the news, and all of the hullabaloo for big winners at casinos were all designed to make people dream of themselves in their shoes, drawing them into the dangerous vice. Of course, those big winners had beaten astronomical odds, and most people’s gambling experiences were in the red. It simply would not be called gambling if one could keep winning without cheating.

“They’ve demanded I enter the colosseum to repay my debt... People die in there every day and they think it’s a game! My father is still imprisoned there...”

“A game...” Lying down on the bed, the Demon Lord scowled at the ceiling. If the colosseum had been mere child’s play, he wouldn’t have paid it any mind. But a game of life or death... He had some expertise in that; he even felt a tinge of outrage that they would dare host a life or death game without him. Half of his life, after all, had been spent with a battle royale that encroached upon the

real world. “What do you think, Ren?”

“I can’t imagine it’s anything good if it’s run by the Jack of All Trades.”

“Hm. Let’s go take a look, then.”

Ren held the Demon Lord’s hands in hers, picking up that he was going to Quick Travel, a method of transportation that seemed ordinary to them, but would be an unbelievable nightmare for Diamonds, who had the slums surrounded so tightly he could prevent a single bug from escaping.

“I’ll be out for a bit,” the Demon Lord announced. “Make yourselves at home.”

In the blink of an eye, Ren and the Demon Lord vanished, their presence and all. The sisters exclaimed in surprise, but there was no one left on the bed.

“Mister King *is* an incredible mage!”

“Mister King’s king magic!”

The sisters cried.

The simple act of entering Stealth Stance followed by a Quick Travel appeared nothing short of a spectacular magic spell. This decision would soon lead to another bizarre misunderstanding in the slums, which, in all fairness, was entirely the fault of the Demon Lord.

Once they were out on the main street, the Demon Lord and Ren walked along the road, remaining comfortably undetectable among bustling foot traffic. Speaking to each other via Communication as they went, they enjoyed the dazzling cityscape of the capital, illuminated with countless Light Spell Stones.

The city seems more prosperous out here, the Demon Lord communicated.

A drastic change from the slums. It’s like... Ren trailed off, uncharacteristically.

Of course, the Demon Lord caught on to the words that would have followed. *A life or death colosseum, glory to the rich, and misery to the poor. You see the Empire in this city.*

I wouldn’t have...

You're not wrong to think so. There's one definitive difference, however.

What is it, Master?

It's not nearly enough... the Demon Lord answered mysteriously, and they went further into the city until they reached the entrance of Blue Bricks, which led out into a large plaza that was congested with pedestrians.

According to Warin, the dungeon was built from literal blue bricks that could withstand any impact, physical or magical.

"Hey, there were *three* Blue Mirrors today!"

"For real?!"

"Six gold coins a pop!"

"Why can't I ever get one?! You could party for months!"

"It *will* be me, next time! I'm going to do it!"

The adventurers all reacted to the news in their own, dramatic way. The Demon Lord immediately saw through this, however: a plant, like Warin had mentioned, produced into a grand spectacle by Jack and served up as cheese on a trap to lure adventurers into the dungeon.

All scripted. It's almost adorable how hard they're working to keep this up...

This is a place full of deceit.

The Demon Lord cackled when a pair of men fell back onto the ground.

"How... How is he here?! He's supposed to be tr-tr-tr-tr-tr-trapped in the slums...!"

"Oh, no, no, no, no... Eyze, it's that guy!"

The Demon Lord's and Ren's expressions changed, knowing that seeing past Stealth Stance required a certain threshold of skill.

"D-Don't say my name, you idiot! What if he remembers it?!"

"W-Wait, don't choke me, Eyze! Please, Eyze!"

"Shut up!"

The pair revealed themselves fully. As soon as the Demon Lord put a cigarette

in his mouth, Ren lit it.

“City guards, by the look of it,” the Demon Lord said. “Good eye...Eyze.”

“Th-That’s not my name! This newbie right here, h-he’s a serial liar, born and raised—”

“That’s horrible, Eyze! Don’t call me a liar, Eyze! Why would you say something like that, Eyze?!”

“Stop calling my name! You know what you’re doing, don’t you?! Huh?!”

Watching Eyze and his partner wrestle, the Demon Lord chuckled. He felt a strange sense of sympathy after being relentlessly addressed as King. A patrol unit, composed of Lilus and his men, overheard them and came over.

“What’s going on— Damn it, Eyze.” Lilus scowled at Eyze from atop of his horse, reminded of the numerous times when one of Eyze’s outbursts halted their mission or travels. Then, he spotted the Demon Lord in his suit and discerned him to be King. “Going to suck up to Heaven’s Ward now, Eyze?”

“N-No, I—”

“That’s why you’ll always be a loser. The only thing on your mind’s to ride on the coattails of someone else who has what it takes... You disgust me.” Lilus spat in Eyze’s face.

Eyze wiped it off with a filthy piece of fabric that could barely be called a handkerchief. No matter how miserable he was, he couldn’t make a retort.

“And sucks for you,” Lilus added, “he *doesn’t* have what it takes. Just a loser about to be executed.” He raised his arm, which called a hundred mercenaries to come in formation, all pointing their weapons at the Demon Lord and Ren, almost happy that they were spared the hassle of cornering them in the slums.

“What’s up, King? First time seeing you without your armor.”

“You are mistaken. My name isn’t King, and we’ve never met before.”

“So that’s how you sound. You’re a quiet man on the battlefield, but you’ve got a good bass voice.”

“I’m—”

“Come off it, man! None of this you’re-not-King bull. You think no one would know who you are with your armor off?” With an exasperated laugh, he moved his men forward.

Ren took a step forward as if to stand between them and the Demon Lord.
“They are hostile, Master.”

“Come on, King, you’re going to hide behind this cutie? Kind of disappointed, if I’m being real here. Pathetic without your armor on...”

The Demon Lord had been quietly enjoying a smoke but decided to ask, “Just to confirm, you *are* trying to kill me?” Just like the thugs at the slums, it seemed evident that they were specifically after his life.

“Huh? What are you... You came swinging at Euritheis. At the Jack of All Trades. You think you can make it out of the capital alive? Your head belongs to the Five Stars now.”

“I see... Then I’d best fight back.”

“You screwed up, King. You let a bit of infamy get to your head. Puffed your chest at the wrong guy. You two losers would have gotten along.” Lilus’s lips curled.

The Demon Lord, too, wore a bitter grin as he was reminded of his younger self in Eyze.

When the world of Akira Ono was crushed by the flood of social media craze. A section of the internet had been populated by heartless comments:

Ono’s site crashed and burned, LOL. What a loser.

He’s toast.

His games were so dated.

At the time, Akira plunged himself into the depths of drink and debauchery, spending his days at rock bottom. With his savings drained, he had begun working at a video game company only to find no fulfillment there. Rinse and repeat. Of course, Akira had not given up. He bided his time for a long, long time, before throwing his heart and soul into the fires of one last retry...

Reminiscing about old times, the Demon Lord muttered to himself, “From the

market crash and the jobless era to my temp and contractor days, people like you have always preached about victors and losers. Every single one of them was as paper-thin as you.”

“Huh?”

“Winning... Losing... What it all means... Those are only inside each of us. Nothing is as comical as a complete stranger giving a lecture on what it means to *win* at life.”

“Cool story... But you’re still coming out the loser.” Lilus had discreetly called for his teammates as he kept the Demon Lord busy, and now there were three other Five Star higher-ups leading their own teams of a hundred mercenaries to the plaza. “You thought I was listening to you drone on for my entertainment? *Losers* only keep their eyes on what’s in front of them in the moment.”

Even in the face of the Five Star mercenary company, the Demon Lord and Ren remained still.

“No need to kill them, Ren.”

“Pardon me, Master, but they have clear intentions to kill you.”

“No need to dirty your hands with these punks,” the Demon Lord said to further quell Ren’s wrath.

“Master...” With teary eyes, Ren wrapped her arms around his waist. “If it is your will, Master, I am ready to cut down and impale a billion foes.”

“Hold on, don’t say things like that with your arms around me!”

The higher-ups of the Five Stars shared an exasperated look at this. They each had their thoughts about King, whom they had met on the battlefield a few times.

“That’s King’s face... Looks even more intense than I thought,” said Giuliani, known as the Berserker, a large man with an even larger war hammer that turned all who came near him to ground meat. The hammer was so heavy that no ordinary man could have lifted it at all.

“I thought he’d be a bit younger... Too bad,” said Warden of Hell Marietta. She was a serpentine woman who had become a warden of slaves in the

renowned gold mines of Goldstone during her time off from mercenary work. There, she left behind a pile of bodies. Her scimitar was all golden from its handle to the edge of its blade.

“Age is but a number in our business... King should not be viewed lightly,” spoke the famed sage Aérios, the Fire of Sotta. He had become a sort of local hero after burning down an entire goblins’ nest in the Sotta mountains to the north.

“Hmph. With all of us here, we could take out a Firebrand.” Lastly, there was Lilus the Illusionary Sword, who had gained his fame as a monster hunter after solo-hunting a Unicorn Bug.

Every one of the higher-ups was a top-notch fighter, and the rest of their battalion was better trained than most armies around. It was only natural that they grew to become one of the most popular mercenary companies on the continent. Considering that, Eyze had it bad in more ways than one when he was working alongside them.

Giuliani moved his horse forward, his war hammer on one shoulder. “We’re both mercenaries. Choose an honorable death and I won’t make it painful.”

“Don’t interrupt my time with my master,” Ren quietly said, her arms still embracing the Demon Lord.

Giuliani brushed his clean-shaven head, looking a bit troubled. “Come on, little girl. We’re not here to play.”

“I’m not playing. My love for my master is as real as it can be.”

“H-Hey, little girl... Could it be you’re...using me to confess your love to this guy?! Is that what’s going on?!” Giuliani shouted, his face beet-red from anger and jealousy.

The Demon Lord decided to play off this reaction and said, “A request for you, Ren. Entertain them for a bit.”

After a long silence, Ren regrettably relinquished her hold on the Demon Lord. “Yes, Master.” She faced her foe.

The Demon Lord took his cue to scuttle off to one of the chairs in the plaza,

where he situated his ashtray and a bottle of shochu he had taken from the casino, ready to become a perfect spectator. “Go easy on them, Ren.”

At his command, Ren produced a long lance from a dark void that materialized in the air. Her weapon of choice, Ningen Mukotsu, had sent countless players to their graves. The point was formed by a spiral of several blades that emanated an ominous red glow, its length longer than she was tall.

“Resistance is futile. Surrender now...”

Ren’s masterful stance and the eerie presence of the lance froze the members of the Five Stars, even despite their exceptional prowess. It was precisely because of their talent that they felt in their bones how dangerous the lance was. By their estimation, it was at least a Legendary and almost certainly an Ancient Fragment.

Overcome with fear, Lilus cried out, “N-Not fair, King! Y-You got a lance I-like...*that?!!*”

“Hm? You were just boasting up and down how successful you are. What do you have to fear in anything a *loser* like me has up his sleeve? Go big or go home. You won’t be going home after this, though.”

“Are you kidding me?! This is like cheating! And you call yourself a mercenary?! You crossed the line, man!”

“You’re afraid of a little girl with a lance? Is that what it means to be *victors*? Man up. Go big or go home. You won’t be going home after this, though. That was important enough to bear repeating,” the Demon Lord tore them to shreds with his words as he sipped his shochu on the rocks. Such a professional scumbag he was that he didn’t forget to goad his enemies even after resigning himself to spectate.

Giuliani whirled his war hammer as if to blow this miasma of fear away. “It’s a bluff! The hell are you scared of that girl for?!” He triggered his Weightlifter and Bodybuilder skills to drastically power himself up. These skills each raised his Attack and Defense, and he continued to buff himself by activating his Revitalize skill, which negated any exhaustion, as well as the Numb skill, which prevented him from feeling pain. In this state, Giuliani was truly an unstoppable berserker.

“Time to grind you to a pulp... No more games!” He charged at a speed that betrayed his size, raising his war hammer, delivering his coup de grâce that reduced his foes to mincemeat, armor, shield, and all. “Eat this! Meat Grinder!”

The earth-shattering blow struck Ren straight on the head, but she didn’t budge an inch. She simply waved her left hand as if to swat away a fly, which caused Giuliani’s massive frame to fly and tumble through the lines of mercenaries behind him, leaving a glaring gap in their previously flawless formation. Giuliani was motionless, bones shattered throughout his body.

As the Five Stars company fell silent, Ren’s deadly voice echoed, “For daring to challenge my master with such laughable skill... Death will be a merciful punishment.”

“Wh-What are you...coming at me for?!” Marietta, who had abused and killed many slaves in her time, let out the first feminine scream she had in years as Ren slowly approached. “I-I won’t die here! I have so much more gold to—”

With the silent swing of her lance, Ren slammed the Warden of Hell off of her horse. She had sensed some darkness about the woman that reminded her of Yu; Ren even considered executing her here and now.

“Are you trying to seduce my master with that outfit?”

“I-I would never! I have no interest in him whatsoever! Really!” Marietta frantically denied the charge, pierced by Ren’s soul-freezing gaze.

Ren silently swung the blunt end of her lance beside Marietta’s face.

“Agghhhh!”

“No interest? How dare you say my master has no allure.”

“N-No, I didn’t— It’s a misunderstanding! H-He’s a very alluring gentleman!”

“Every sentient being knows that.”

“Y-Yes, they dooo!” Marietta broke into sobs.

As if she was trying to break Marietta’s spirit in lieu of killing her outright, Ren was uncharacteristically turning to verbal assault. It was becoming difficult to see who was more fitting of the title of Warden of Hell.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord was turning a blind eye, sitting within his cloud of cigarette smoke. *I didn't come, I didn't see, and I didn't conquer... Nothing happened here today.* In a display of peak laziness, the Demon Lord turned to his drink as if it was a beautiful Sunday in the park with nothing amiss.

Seeing Ren preoccupied with Marietta, the sage Aerios, the Fire of Sotta, began casting spells at incredible speeds. He made a judgment call: move now or die.

“Terribly sorry, but I’m not holding back! Multiplied: Flame Bird!”

Aerios cast this Flame (an elevation of Fire) spell, and a class-3 at that, considered to be the zenith of human magery. While a talented few like Luna and Yukikaze were able to cast spells in rapid succession through Chain Incantation, Aerios had cast two iterations of the spell at once. Living up to his title of sage, he had annihilated the Sotta goblins and their nest through casting explosive Multiplied spells. Twin inferno birds swooped in on Ren from either side.

“This is the end!” Aerios uttered.

The birds that were poised to incinerate their target evaporated in the blink of an eye thanks to Ren’s World Queller.

“It didn’t— Bragh!”

Ren leapt behind Aerios with blinding speed and struck him on the back of the head, making the sage crumble to the ground, her eyes now set on Lilus.

“What the...?! What’s going on?!” he shouted. They had overcome battlefield after battlefield, with abuse and degradation from clients and nobles to make it this far. *We’d finally made it... We’re victors! How did this happen?!*

Single-handedly taken out by a young girl, and in the lavish capital of Euri no less. Bad news traveled fast, so this could very well tank the reputation of the mercenary company.

“Surround her, the lot of you! No holding back!”

At Lilus’s command, the mercenaries jumped into action as if they had been woken from a nightmare.

Their movement was swift and refined, but the Demon Lord had a comment to make. “*Surround* Ren? Like moths to a lamp...”

Final bosses of the game, like Ren and the Demon Lord, were expected to be outnumbered and surrounded by players, so they were equipped with several ways to escape this very situation.

With a quick inhale, Ren activated one of her Combat Skills, Self Restraint. This skill ensured that her enemies were left with at least 1 HP no matter how much damage she dealt to them. On the surface, this skill may have seemed counterintuitive to the point of Kunai’s Game, but it had its alternative uses. A player could have used this skill to keep a particular enemy alive for some time as they repeatedly attacked them to grind EXP and loot. In a way, this skill was an indicator of the severity of the game.

With Ren completely surrounded, Lilus had just finished a lengthy incantation to cast the best attack in his arsenal, right off the bat. He had the special talent of combining the incongruent Light and Dark elements to warp space around him. In the art of Magical Mixology, he was an irrefutable genius.

—Holy Mist, Dark Vision

“You can’t run now, you little punk!”

—Prison of Darkness

Two opposing forces collided, distorting the world around them so that most would have lost their sense of balance. Lilus multiplied into eight copies of himself and turned to the offensive with the rest of his battalion. Even monsters were disoriented in this space, attacking at nothingness. He always won his battles as he watched his foes scramble fruitlessly in his prison. This time, however, he was facing Ren Miyaoji—an entity that far surpassed any human or monster he had previously encountered.

—First Skill: Flicker

Ren swung Ningen Mukotsu in a circular motion at a godly speed. The next instant, all four hundred of the Five Stars, the Prison of Darkness, and Lilus himself fell. If not for Ren’s Self Restraint, all of their torsos would have been severed in half.

Ren lowered her lance. Masterful arts of combat are often described as dance-like, and this was a stunning performance. Illuminated by the Light Spell Stones of the dusk-fallen capital, Ren even appeared mystical.

It was then that jarring applause pierced the silence of the plaza, coming from Ignatio, leader of the Five Stars, and his team of a hundred men standing behind him, frozen with fear.

“I’ve been watching from a safe distance for a bit, but you’re out of this world. Total cheat, if you ask me. Are you even human?”

“Keep it short. You’re wasting time I could spend with my master.”

“I *wish* I could just walk away, but we’re on the verge of collapse here.” A smile plastered on his face, Ignatio drew his sword and approached Ren head-on.

Ren had a strange feeling about this but decided to let things play out.

Soon, Ignatio leapt far above Ren’s head. “Sorry! I’m not going to touch a monster like you with a ten-foot pole!” Ignatio’s cape was enchanted with the power of High Jump, which allowed him to reach far higher in the air than any wingless man could reach. “Here we go, **Aerial Drive!**” Controlling the wind and ignoring Ren altogether, Ignatio freely flew through the air and targeted the Demon Lord from behind, dive-bombing towards the back of his head.

Ignatio’s sword was a One-of-a-Kind designed to absorb the impacts on the blade and store up the accumulated damage. He preferred to strike like a bird of prey, leaping high into the air and swooping down from the natural blind spot of many creatures, ready to escape back up into the air for another swoop should the first fail.

“Sword Impact!” he spoke as he unleashed all of the damage stored up in his blade.

An incredible impact rang through the air as the earth rumbled and dust clouds rose in the plaza. No matter how powerful a monster or hellbeast, the stronger the opponent, the more destruction his sword wrought.

As the air cleared, Ignatio saw, despite feeling the kill in his swing, that the Demon Lord’s Assault Queller had entirely blocked Ignatio’s attack.

The Demon Lord set his glass on the table. “You thought this circus trick would work against the Demon Lord of the Empire?”

“Wait— Huh? What’s th— *Hgragh!*”

The Demon Lord threw a light uppercut at Ignatio who was floating in the air above him, sending him back upwards much higher than he had jumped on his own. On Ignatio’s way down, Ren snagged his collar with her lance to catch him before impact. Out of context, he almost looked like a piece of laundry caught on a drying rack.

Ren discarded Ignatio with a flick of her lance and opened her pocket watch.

“Five minutes and four seconds, Master.”

“And if you had pulled out all the stops?”

“Eight seconds would have sufficed to eliminate them all.”

“I see,” the Demon Lord acknowledged as if he was training an Olympian. He approached Ignatio, who remained sprawled on the ground in complete shock. “I have a question for you. Where’s the *cargo* you stole?”

“Way to k-kick a horse when it’s down... Who do you work for anyway...?”
With a weak shake of his head and a chuckle, he pointed to a ship that was docked over by the harbor: the very one Jack was planning to use to ship the goods off by sea.

“A ship, I see.”

“Sell those off and you could rule the place for a while... It’s not fair out here, is it?”

“I don’t know what you’re on about, but I don’t need that.”

“What do you mean—”

Without bothering to answer, the Demon Lord jumped high onto a roof, then jumped from house to house. Ren followed suit.

“Come on, they’re better at using Wind than I am?! Give me a break...”
Ignatio collapsed, soul crushed.

Soon, the Demon Lord arrived at the port, where many fishing and trading

boats were docked. The one Ignatio had pointed at was a carrack anchored off shore.

“No one’s on board either. Perfect.”

“What cargo is on the ship, Master?”

“Some sort of crack or cocaine or whatever.” The Demon Lord threw Sodom’s Fire at the vessel without hesitation.

The dagger triggered Expert Chain Attacks, shaking the carrack with a deafening boom before a black fire emerged from the blade, quickly engulfing the entire ship. Sodom’s Fire lapped up the flammable wood, rope, and sail in no time. The roaring flame reduced everything to ash: the Trance, the valuable artifacts and art pieces, and even the mountain of Krack that could have funded the entire treasury of a small nation for a year.

The black fire flickering in his eyes, the Demon Lord cackled. “That’s one mess off the list! Burn! Burn!” The Demon Lord was ecstatic to have this seed of trouble taken care of, never mind that he had just set the ship of a foreign nation ablaze. The violence and cackling were becoming of the Demon Lord’s title; Ren watched him with fondness, knowing the cargo on board had been some sort of dangerous narcotics.

“I hate to intrude on your celebration, Master, but people are beginning to notice.”

“Let us get going, then.”

Using Stealth Stance, the pair vanished into thin air.

The wake left by these two final bosses passing through the dungeon plaza was quite disastrous, the piles upon piles of incapacitated Five Stars mercenaries strewn about the place. Eyze, who had watched the encounter from start to finish, still couldn’t believe his eyes. His exceptionally talented ex-teammates were littered about like scattered debris.

“What the hell...? How did you guys lose...?”

“Eyze...”

Despite those who had degraded him, insulted him, and abused him lying on the ground in defeat, Eyze felt no vindication, but an overwhelming feeling of outrage. The talents he had so revered in his teammates had been crushed by raw strength. Evidence of this cruel reality was sprawled before him. Eyze didn't know how to handle it.

"E-Eyze, we have to call for the medical team..."

"Right..." Eyze began trudging away.

The defeat of the Five Stars, however, was only the prologue to the devastation that the pair of final bosses would wreak in Euritheis. The sound of a great explosion reached the plaza, drawing all eyes of the crowd towards the docks, only for them to find a roaring flame that painted the port crimson.

"No..."

"It's b-b-b-b-burning, Eyze! The ship's on fire!"

"I can see that!"

The flame seemed to foretell the end of an era, as if the ship sinking in the blaze was the Jack of All Trades company itself.

One Night Carnival

After leaving the docks, the Demon Lord and Ren activated Stealth Stance to return to the main street unseen, weaving through the lines of shops. The Demon Lord looked rather excited, ready to browse for a souvenir to bring to Aku.

Ren, you can go walk around the city for a bit. I have something to take care of. After bringing back a bizarre picture book as a souvenir last time, he intended to get something more substantial. Moreover, he felt that a piece from one of the pop-up shops on the street would put less pressure on Aku. *She hasn't worn the silver circlet I got her even one time...* he thought. *But that thing's not practical.* The Demon Lord began to ponder what sort of jewelry would suit Aku's life in the village. A gift for a woman was one thing, but picking out a gift for a child was proving to be quite the conundrum for him.

He Communicated to Ren, *We'll meet up somewhere later... Hm?* He noticed that Ren had taken off her tie and bound their hands together with a heart-shaped knot. *What are you doing, Ren?*

It's dangerous to leave you alone, Master.

You don't think...I'm going to set something else on fire, do you?

You may get lost, Master.

Am I a child to you...?!

I'd just feel better like this.

The Demon Lord frowned, but he couldn't deny the uncontrollable sense of security he felt just by having her close to him—Ren was created to protect him, after all. That much was an irreversible part of their code, encrypted within them on a molecular level. He, too, was bound by his own designs, by the rules of his creation. That's why, for example, he was still taken aback by Yu getting

closer to him than expected.

Fine... Let's go.

Yes, Master.

Still invisible, the pair kept strolling from shop to shop but they didn't find anything noteworthy: only lot after lot of cheaply made rip-offs. Bingo's store had much more stylish options. Despite Bingo's eccentric personality, his shop was a hidden gem of great style and quality.

Finding a kids souvenir is harder than I thought...

For the girl you spoke of before? Something like a basket of fruit may be better appreciated.

Indeed...! That might be more her style. As a perpetual bachelor, the Demon Lord lacked even the most basic knowledge about children. *Perhaps a food that doesn't exist in this world.*

Splendid idea, Master.

Hm. I'll pick something out later.

The Demon Lord carried on with a pep in his step, mentally scrolling through the foods from the game.

They carried on down the main street until they reached a large stone construction before them. *Oh? That's the colosseum we've heard so much about...* Something he hadn't expected was a gigantic awning above the colosseum—a giant dome of fabric held up by Wind Spell Stones that allowed matches to be held rain or shine.

I believe there's an entry fee, Master.

We are no thieves. We'll pay up and enter through the front.

They were no thieves, but they had provoked the Company, destroyed the Five Stars, and burned down a ship full of valuable cargo, so they were at the very least criminals. If Jack could have overheard their conversation, he might have had an aneurysm out of frustration.

As the pair dispelled their Stealth Stance, the men in the box office looked

astounded; the man who was the cause of such chaos in the city had walked right up to them. With Jack in attendance for the ceremony, this was going to spell trouble.

“K-King... What are you doing here?!”

“I came to look for inspiration. How much to get in?” the Demon Lord asked nonchalantly.

“L-Like hell you are! You’re after the boss’s head!”

“Or are you here to beg for mercy... Huh?” One of the box office clerks stopped here and rubbed his eyes a few times. The man rumored to have cast a devastating spell in the slums was now bound by the hand to the girl next to him, with a heart-shaped bow no less. The clerk burst into laughter. “Hey, King! What’s that supposed to mean, huh?!”

“You’re here to give us a good laugh?!”

“Must be some great spell, huh, King?!”

The three clerks continued to laugh, one of them even tearing up as he slapped his knee.

Damn it, I forgot to take this off...!

“King! Why don’t you teach me the magic of getting hitched with a cutie like this?!”

“King’s got a sensitive side, huh?”

“Gah ha ha! Stop it, I can’t take it... It’s too funny...”

The three of them found the situation so funny that they still would have burst out into laughter even if they had understood the repercussions of doing so.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord felt something about to snap. “Oh? If you want to see me perform magic so badly...” The Demon Lord untied his hand and retrieved Pitfall, one of the Trap items, from the void.

After quickly tossing the trap by the feet of the clerks, the Demon Lord ruthlessly smashed the red button in his hand, causing a dark hole to open in a

radius around it, sending the trio falling straight down.

“Aghhh!”

“Owww!”

“Where’d this hole come from...? W-Wait a minute! I’m afraid of the dark!”

While the trap only inflicted 5 damage, its true usefulness was in keeping the target occupied until they managed to crawl out. Setting this against an active pursuer was a difficult feat to accomplish, but it proved quite effective against three men defenselessly guffawing.

The Demon Lord created a series of Anvil Trap items and began throwing them down the pitfall at full strength. This was yet another cartoonishly pointless item that only dealt 1 damage each, but it was quite an effective weapon at pissing opponents off.

“What are those?!” the men shouted as the comical sound effect of anvil crashes echoed through the entrance, followed by a stereotypical laugh track. Despite its lack of tangible damage, the anvils dealt significant damage to their dignity.

“Gah, that hurts! Who the hell is laughing like that?!”

“K-King! Just because you have a hilariously sensitive side and we laughed at it— *Grah!*”

“Afraid of the dark, you said? For I am merciful, let there be light.” The Demon Lord created another batch of prank items, Firecrackers, and lit their fuses with the solemnity of an Olympic relay runner passing the torch, tossing them one after another into the pitfall.

“Aagh! What the— Hot hot hot hot!”

“Hot, it’s so hot!”

“King, you— Hot hot hot hot!”

“Ha ha ha ha! What, you rats don’t want to nibble on those *crackers*?! If you manage to make it back up here, I’ll Mufasa you back down!”

Even though he was wasting precious SP, the Demon Lord was having the

time of his life. As he clapped his hands in delight, he realized that Ren was watching him and swiftly put on his stoic mask. “Erm... That’s enough of this detour.” The Demon Lord stuck a cigarette between his lips and Ren smoothly lit it, with a happy glow in her eyes. She simply seemed happy that her master was happy.

“You do show your youthful spirit sometimes, Master.”

Perhaps embarrassed by Ren’s endlessly soft and embracing gaze, the Demon Lord kicked down the steel door to the colosseum in an attempt to show his Demon-Lord-of-the-Empire-ness. He was too little too late, of course, but he was going to play his part until the bitter end.

“How cheap and tacky... Is this Jack’s little playground?”

Regardless of his true feelings, the Demon Lord appeared as domineering as he possibly could be to the spectators, drawing all eyes to him. Many of them had already heard the rumors of King and immediately recognized the brazen intruder as such. At the same time, their anticipation was building: could he bring about an unscripted surprise? The arena constantly craved blood-pumping, hair-raising action.

As if to quench their thirst, the Demon Lord gave the arena a once-over and boldly announced, “Let’s see the best this Jack of All Trades has to offer...” The Demon Lord walked straight down to the front row and commandeered a seat. Ren took her place next to him, leaning into him. “Don’t mind us,” the Demon Lord called, “Carry on.”

From that undeniably royal behavior, the secret hope for a surprise event quickly reached a boiling point among the audience.

Jack himself was visibly shaken by the intrusion. He recognized instantly that the impudent man in black was the rumored King but had no idea how he could possibly be there.

Meanwhile, the master of ceremonies turned to Jack for direction as to how to proceed. Jack’s temper was nearing an explosion, but he gestured with an aggressive wave of the hand for the emcee to carry on with the show.

What the hell is Diamonds doing...?! He might as well have glass eyes in that

dumb skull of his! There was King, sitting in the front row of his colosseum after he'd ordered Diamonds to lock the slums up airtight. While Jack cursed his failure, Diamonds was merely a victim in this case. No one could have expected that this target could turn invisible and even teleport. *And what about those Five Stars bastards...? Even they screwed up?!* The mercenary company he paid top money for, completely wasted. While Jack's rage intensified, he managed to keep a cool head. *I can't lose it in front of all these spectators... I gotta play it cool.* Rumors that some City States mercenary was single-handedly making a laughingstock out of the Jack of All Trades could be a major detrimental blow to the Company. After repressing various factions through force, Jack expected the pushback would be devastating if his grip of fear and violence over the people were to break. Worst case scenario, it could lead to a revolution and the collapse of his rule.

At Jack's command, the master of ceremonies called to the crowd as if no intrusion had been made. Following his announcement, smiling women in revealing clothing began handing out match cards to the spectators.

Spectators began speculating results and contemplating bets as they read their match cards, the commotion in the colosseum only growing louder.

"Look at this, Ren. The night show has three acts."

"It's intriguing to not know any of the contestants."

The emcee called once more, and the metal bars to the east and west of the arena rose up, through which each contestant entered.

"Now, now," the master of ceremonies continued, "a slight *delay* aside, all guests are welcome at the Jack of All Trades. Let's! Make! Some! Moneyyyy!"

The first ones to enter the arena were not hardened warriors—it was an emaciated man and a neurotic-looking woman. Neither of them looked like they knew what they were doing, the weapons in their hands too big for them.

"They're shaking," Ren remarked.

The fight began without fanfare, and it devolved into a cheap spectacle. Two untrained randoms from the city swinging their weapons around teary-eyed was more like grown-ups playing sword fight.

They lost their breath after a few swings, and they cried out in pain at any slight draw of blood. The spectators couldn't get enough of the skit, clapping and laughing their heads off.

"It is peaceful in a way..."

"I agree, Master."

A clash of two people who didn't know how to fight and had no intention of killing each other. At times, masked men would whip the pair back into the center of the ring. This was merely the dumb play that served to relax the audience before the real fighting began.

"Wine and snacks, wine and snacks here!" Salespeople came weaving through the stadium, but the Demon Lord simply waved them by.

Producing the Item Folder from his pocket, he withdrew an elegant table he had picked out when he left the village and set it up before them. He followed up with a bottle of sparkling wine and two glasses, all of which he had taken from the casino. The Demon Lord had done this without a second thought, but his neighboring spectators couldn't believe their eyes after seeing these items materialize from what looked to just be paper. They forgot to breathe at times, their wide eyes turned to the Demon Lord instead of the match.

"Wh-What kind of spell is that...?"

"It has to be some sort of magical item."

"I've heard there are some bags that can hold more things the more magic its wearer has."

"But he put a *table* in there?!"

He began to garner more attention, as his performance was far rarer than a cheap fight in the colosseum. Not that the Demon Lord paid any mind to the other spectators, but he continued to produce salami and sausages from the void, each of them popular items in the game that healed 20 HP.

Ren gingerly poured his glass of wine, and he held it to his face as if to savor the carbonation and aroma; a gesture so irrefutably kingly. It seemed the eyes of the entire audience were glued to the Demon Lord and his mysterious

powers. Perhaps they had picked up that he had strength to back up the all-threatening pressure that he exuded.

“Child’s play isn’t much for entertainment...” he uttered with grandiosity.

“The next contestants are more experienced.”

“Many of them have the look of a fighter.”

The dumb play concluded and made way for fierce clashes of swords and axes, with even some Fire and Wind magic spells.

The Demon Lord watched the matches with interest, but Ren seemed to lose hers after a few fights and began paying more attention to the spectators, in part because the two of them had been garnering more attention than the action in the arena.

“We have many eyes on us, Master. Offering them fare and libations may garner their favor.”

“Not a bad idea.”

The Demon Lord pulled Food after Food from the void, with Ren transforming them into Cheesecakes and Strawberry Tarts. It was a grand spell for those around him, and the Demon Lord must have felt generous after raking in loads of SP from taking down Spades and his men.

“Courtesy of my master. Please pair them with your wine.” Ren’s otherworldly offerings were immediately well-received by the women for their cute presentation and sweet scent. Some of them timidly took their first bites.

“It’s so delicious!”

“Incredibly sweet!”

“What’s happening...? My mouth feels happy...”

Everyone from high-class ladies to glamorous women of the night exclaimed in innocent excitement, which led to their dates trying a bite as well and breaking into silly grins.

The Cheesecake was just the right amount of sweet and even healed 25 Stamina. The Strawberry Tart healed 50.

The men joined in with the ladies and began exclaiming praise for the taste and revitalizing sensation of the desserts. One of them, an elderly gentleman, even regained *stamina* below the belt.

“It’s alive... My monster is finally alive!”

“Darling... It’s incredible!”

“Hey, it’s hard! Old man Medopad’s hard!”

“For real?!”

Whatever was going on down in the arena mattered little to the people in the audience; excitement was now storming around the Demon Lord, spectators fighting over the cake being handed out by Ren, who seemed to be happy that her master’s items were bringing smiles to people’s faces. Even the Demon Lord watched this scene with contentment. He certainly didn’t mind people praising items of his creation left and right.

Meanwhile, in the royal booth, Jack was outraged by the blatant sabotage of his business.

“King... You bastard...!” Jack slammed his fist on the table, making the minister jump in the corner of the booth.

The minister, however, only dabbed his sweaty, pale face, not daring to say a word.

“What magic is he using...?” Jack grumbled, and understandably so. He had just witnessed someone pull out various things from a piece of paper before producing a glowing ball of light and changing the ball into food, all as if he was some street magician. At this point, Jack had confirmed his suspicion that King was able to wield bizarre magic spells.

Sipping on his glass of wine, the Demon Lord was back in spectator mode.

The emcee joined in, desperate to redirect the attention of the audience to the fighting. “Are you tired of sitting on the edge of your seat?! Are you out of breath to bate?! Then I have just the contestants for you!”

The spectators answered the emcee with thunderous excitement. Apparently, the next fight was a fan favorite.

“Let us enjoy the luxury,” the emcee continued, “of watching from safety and comfort as despicable scum battle it out!”

The spectators were now jumping to their feet in excitement as the fighters made their entrances.

“We’re bringing out the best right off the bat! A man kicked from his party for looking intimidating but ultimately being useless... Nightk Ing!”

“Winter is coming!”

“The most deadbeat-iest of deadbeats! The legendary bum who’s been kicked out of forty-three parties for spending their funds on gambling and hookers... Vegas Dad!”

“Tee hee!”

“The master of unrealistic wet dreams! A piece of crap who is routinely ejected from parties for incessant sexual harassment and stalking... Fanfik Vi Tumblr!”

“Fanfik demands it... All females will fall for me without reason!”

As the crowd went wild for the fighters, the Demon Lord muttered, “Are these all gonna be party rejects...?”

“This is a strange world, Master.”

“One couldn’t hope for much better in a party dropout! A man completely useless except for his ability to find one bronze coin a day... Lee Roy Jinkens!”

“Wow!”

“Another party firee! A man who wouldn’t simp for his stuck-up love interest and tried to be reincarnated in the countryside for a slow life with female slaves and women that are definitely over eighteen but look nine... O.P. Chadster!”

“I just wanted a quiet life...”

The Demon Lord was at a loss for words at these introductions, and even Ren had a furrowed brow. They were starting to lose track of what kind of event this was to begin with. It was starting to look more like a contest of douchebaggery than a colosseum fight.

“There’s more of them...?” the Demon Lord muttered as the anticlimactic fight began, the dropouts insulting and fruitlessly striking each other.

Ren poured the Demon Lord another glass of wine as he read ahead to the next event. “The veterans are coming out soon.” Despite the acts thus far, seasoned fighters, star adventurers, and famed bounty hunters engaged in high-level combat that tested their brains and guts.

“Now these ones are not dropouts...” the Demon Lord remarked. “Up next...” He squinted at the upcoming contestant’s name on the match card, while Ren waited quietly for him to explain. “Ren,” he said, “the next match will end in fire.”

“Such foresight before the match even begins...” Ren stared at her master, wide-eyed.

Written on the match card was “Endjoy vs Zippo.”

When Endjoy entered the arena, he spotted the Demon Lord in the front row. “Wh-What the hell are you doing here?!”

“I’m merely a spectator.”

“Heh! Then drool as you watch me win glory and fortune!” Endjoy boasted and turned to his opponent.

The Demon Lord had no real basis for his prediction, but the match did turn out as he said. Endjoy was in the lead at first but fell behind later in the match as he began to run out of Stamina. In the end, Zippo’s Fire spell lit Endjoy’s rear end on fire, his screams echoing through the arena.

“Ow! Hot, hot, hot! Water! I need water!”

Watching Endjoy roll around the arena, the spectators burst into laughter, slapping their knees. This was the perfect break from the intense combat between serious fighters.

“He’s always on fire, all right...” the Demon Lord remarked, a slice of ham in his mouth.

“Just as you predicted, Master.”

“Indeed.” The Demon Lord continued to watch Endjoy stop, drop, and roll and

roll and roll, but the fire showed no sign of going out until one of the guards splashed a bucket of water on him and extracted him from the arena on a sort of gurney.

As Endjoy was being carried out, the Demon Lord quietly approached him. His rear end was reddened by the fire, smoke still sizzling from it.

“That was quite some flatulence to keep the fire going,” the Demon Lord said.

“I didn’t...! Damn it, laugh if you want to; go on, laugh!”

“Gah ha ha ha ha! Bwah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“Don’t actually do it!”

“What do you expect?”

The Demon Lord turned his back on Endjoy’s outrage and returned to his seat, checking the next event on the match card: a deathmatch between B-rank adventurers.

“Apparently the next match will continue until one of them dies, Master.

“Hm.”

The emcee announced, “To the east... Battleaxe Master Gorda!”

A mountainous man entered from the eastern gate, who seemed quite the fighter by the Demon Lord’s estimate, but less so than Mikan.

“To the west... Alverd, the Sword Flash!”

The audience reacted to the emcee with explosive cheers for both contestants, many of them eager to see their bets pay off.

“So that swordsman’s his opponent,” said the Demon Lord.

“Judging by his stance, he’s survived many battles.”

The two fighters clashed in the center of the arena, the sound of clashing metal echoing through the colosseum. As they began to warm up, their weapons flew faster.

The intense fight demanded every second of the audience’s attention, everyone sitting on the edge of their seats. While Gorda’s attacks packed more

strength, Alverd was faster than him.

“What’s your guess, Ren?”

“Neither of them have shown all of their cards yet.”

True to Ren’s assessment, Gorda moved to finish the match. With repeated attacks at full swing, Alverd was blown to the edge of the arena.

“Tear him apart! **Storm Impact!**” The Spell Stone embedded in Gorda’s axe glowed green, conjuring a class-3 Storm spell (elevated from Wind), assaulting Alverd with a massive impact... Or so it appeared.

When the dust settled, Alverd was standing exactly where he had been as if nothing had happened.

“Thought you were just a meathead,” Alverd remarked, “didn’t expect you to have an ace up your sleeve like that.”

Gorda was lost for words at Alverd’s breezy attitude.

To be precise, a white force field had appeared around Alverd just before the spell hit and neutralized it. This was thanks to a magical item Alverd wore, which had helped him get this far.

“Let’s wrap this up, shall we? Sword Flash!”

Alverd swung his sword at incredible speed, sending Gorda’s head flying high into the air, a geyser of blood gushing from his neck.

The spectators were stunned for a moment but soon burst out into praise for Alverd’s finishing blow.

“Hell yeah! You never let us down, Alverd!”

“Thanks for the cash, Alverd!”

The Demon Lord, however, continued to quietly observe Alverd in a way that would have instilled fear in mortal men. Unfortunately for Alverd, he was too far away to notice.

“It seems he has something that protects him from magic...” The Demon Lord said.

Hearing this, Ren swiftly began gathering intel from the spectators around

them. Most stories of Alverd they had to offer pertained to either his matches in the colosseum or tall-tale legends such as him defeating a devil. Some, however, knew a bit more about the contestant.

“Master, he apparently found it in a dungeon. It’s a magical item that protects him from magic of a certain caliber.”

“I see.”

“I’m not sure where, but I will further investigate—”

“No need to find out where.” The Demon Lord’s eyes told of his true intentions: *take it*. “We’ll offer a price for it at first. He seems like the reasonable type. I’m sure we’ll come to an understanding... I’m sure of it.”

“Yes, Master. Your safety supersedes all else.”

The final bosses now had their eyes set on Alverd, but ignorance was bliss for him while it lasted.

After the deathmatch, the emcee announced a surprise event. They seemed to mix in these surprises to keep the experience fresh for the audience. The Demon Lord had scoffed at the Company when he walked in, but they were managing the colosseum quite well.

“To the west... Olivia the Muse!”

At the emcee’s call, a beautiful woman entered with a harp, drawing curiosity from the crowd as to how she was going to use the instrument as a weapon.

“To the east... A warrior from beyond the seas! Akechi Jubei Mitsuhide!”

“Huh?” the Demon Lord blurted stupidly, completely stunned by that name.

Ren watched closely as a beautiful girl entered from the eastern gate with her long black hair in a ponytail, wearing feudal-era wrist and shin guards, draped in a haori.



Akechi...? the Demon Lord wondered. *Like the famous samurai? And they're a girl?!*

Meanwhile, the match began. Olivia reached for her harp and began playing masterful tunes. Her harp was no ordinary instrument, but a magical item that afflicted her enemies, its power magnified by her own magic.

"Dance to my music..." she uttered. Her music would have even affected the likes of hellbeasts, but this time she was out of luck.

Akechi had plugged both of her ears. Eliminating one's hearing in combat might have seemed suicidal, but considering that her opponent's weapon obviously dealt with music, it was an understandable tactic.

"Master..."

"That's Tanegoshima." The Demon Lord called the matchlock Akechi was holding by its nickname in Japan at the time.

The matchlock was the first firearm introduced to Japan. Firearms, of course, led to exponential deaths on the battlefield, accelerating war worldwide.

Tanegoshima was also an obtainable weapon in the game, treated as a sort of gambit weapon that had a tedious reload time and abysmal range but dealt catastrophic damage when it hit.

"She's aiming for her right hand."

"Looks like it."

Blam!

A piercing gunshot rang through the arena, blasting Olivia's right hand away from the harp. The shot would have blown the hand of an ordinary fighter clean off.

The samurai drew her katana and swung at Olivia's neck with incredible speed. The sound of a dull impact followed, and Olivia collapsed.

"I'll leave you with your life..." the samurai said and sheathed her katana before turning to leave the arena.

The spectators sent her off with applause and whistles. The Demon Lord and Ren, too, watched her ponytail bounce with polite applause. The spectators around them were already discussing her *magic* with great enthusiasm.

“Was that a Wind spell?”

“Nah... That was Fire, as far as I could tell. I saw a spark.”

“You idiots. She sent a rock flying.”

“She was totally cute, though...”

The collective audience seemed ecstatic at the birth of another fighter, who was sure to only grow in popularity with beauty that matched her strength.

“She’s an interesting one, isn’t she, Master?”

“It seems there’s another person I need to make an appointment with.” The Demon Lord knocked his wine glass back, staring at the gate she left through. His mind was surely burning with a thousand questions from the mere fact that she dressed like a samurai. Was it a coincidental fashion, or did Japan exist in this world? If it did, what time period would this Japan be in?

Judging by the matchlock, is it the feudal era...? Wait, there’s no way my Japan exists in this world. Even if there was a Japan in this world, the Demon Lord told himself, it would be a different nation than the one he lived in in another world. While he wanted to avoid conflating the two, he couldn’t get past one thing.

“Akechi Mitsuhide, huh...?” Anyone in Japan, even those without any interest in history, knew that name: the man who executed the largest coup in Japan’s history, the Honnoji incident. The one he shot with an arrow...was also dubbed “Demon Lord.”

Is it a coincidence? Or is there something else going on? The Demon Lord pondered this with what he saw at the bottom of the Bastille Dungeon on his mind. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Akechi was some sort of agent sent against him by the Great Light, the Angels, or whoever else wanted him defeated. Akechi Mitsuhide was none other than the historical Demon Lord killer, after all. *If I’m thinking in terms of the real Akechi, it’s dangerous to make an enemy or friend out of her...* As a man with the title of Demon Lord, this was

a natural conclusion. Try to take her in and there may be a reenactment of the Honnoji incident, this time with the Demon Lord burning along with his castle. He would have much preferred to keep any fire near him contained to Endjoy's rear end.

As the Demon Lord was deep in thought, a fanfare rang in the arena, announcing the final match of the night. "Ladies and gentlemen," the emcee cried, "Here comes the grand finale! Get out your handkerchiefs now! The man who fought his way through the colosseum tooth and nail for his family back in the slums... Faces his final challenge tonight!"

The contestant entered, greeted by the audience with a standing ovation. He was well-built but terribly beaten down, fresh scars all over his body and a rag wrapped around half of his face, apparently covering a severe burn that ran onto his neck.

"For his wife and daughters who faithfully await his return, our challenger has one enormous wall to climb! Win this match and his debt will be forgiven on the spot! *If* he can defeat! His! Opponent!"

Beastly breathing rumbled from behind the metal bars along the wall. The spectators let out gasps and yelps, seeing that a hellbeast lurked on the other side.

"Our challenger must face the Executioner of Blue Bricks, a bloodthirsty hellbeast, Murderbros itself! Will he prevail?!"

It was a giant bipedal bull covered in black fur from head to toe. It wore a black hood and carried a monstrous club. Most parties wouldn't survive an encounter with it, making it entirely unbelievable that the downtrodden challenger even had a chance. The spectators foresaw tragedy in the arena, but that only seemed to feed their intoxication. Half cheers, half screams filled the colosseum with eerie excitement.

"Master, he's..."

"The father of those sisters."

While his injuries obscured the resemblance, he was, indeed, the man in their family portrait. His daughters might have sobbed at the mere sight of their

father like this.

“Master...”

“Stay where you are, Ren.”

Ren lowered her gaze as the metal bars gradually rose. The man in the arena might have seen an hourglass rapidly running out of sand.

He quietly spoke, his voice swallowed by the uproar of the crowd, “I’m coming home, honey... Kids... I’m almost there...” The shrieks of the spectators even seemed to shake the colosseum itself. Forcing one foot in front of the other, the challenger shouted, as if to defy his looming destiny, “I’m coming home!”

The instant the bars were completely raised, the hellbeast charged with a blood-curdling howl. Just as it rose its club for the kill, a red line fired from the Demon Lord to the hellbeast, splitting the air. The hellbeast exploded, every little fragment of it burning to black flames.

The mad frenzy of the colosseum was immediately extinguished, all eyes in the arena glued to the Demon Lord leisurely twirling his glass.

“That pathetic lug was the main course? This Jack is apparently an ignoramus.”

“King! What the hell are you doing?!” Jack jumped to his feet and shouted, his patience having finally run thin. He could no longer stay silent after suffering such public humiliation.

The Demon Lord, on the other hand, kept his legs crossed, shaking his head. “You have no idea what true entertainment is.”

“What...?”

“If it were me...I would have pitted that man and his family in the slums against each other.”

“You— What?!”

Of course, the Demon Lord would have only done so in one of his Games, but no one there was any the wiser. He stood from his chair and leapt into the arena with ease. He looked up at the royal booth to find the large, ogre-like

man with the beet-red face. *So that's Jack*, the Demon Lord thought. *Causing me all of this trouble... Stop calling me King, you moron!* The Demon Lord pointed at Jack, directing his pent-up frustration at the man and signaling for him to come down to the arena. He was ready to clock Jack in the face and get this over with.

"If you want to provide some *quality* entertainment, why don't you come down here and do the job yourself?"

"You..." Jack gritted his teeth. He couldn't answer the taunt, of course. If he, the don of the Company, were to lose to some mysterious grand spell, the entire rule of the Jack of All Trades would crumble to the ground.

So, Jack answered from his booth. "*You're* the one who doesn't get it, King. A true leader can't be bothered to take on every wacko with a death wish."

The audience gasped. The Demon Lord had already blown them away by taking out the hellbeast in a single strike, but Jack's retort had been just as impressive, exuding *class* becoming of their don. Unfortunately for Jack, he had just challenged the worst man imaginable to a contest of blowing smoke.

No one could out-talk the Demon Lord in a situation like this. "I understand... Then allow me to make a proposal to poor little Jack shivering in his britches. Would you feel better fighting my secretary, rather than myself?" At his cue, Ren too leapt out of her seat, landing next to her master. As gracious and elegant as her appearance was, no one in the audience considered her a match for Jack in the arena. "So cowardly, Scaredy-Cat Jack. Don't tell me you're too afraid to fight this girl? If you are, you should live out your days in a tutu. In fact, I will personally gift you one, along with a set of dainty lingerie," the Demon Lord rattled off in an excellent display of his ability to get under people's skin. While Tahara, too, was a master of this skill, the Demon Lord was practically born to irritate his enemies.

"That motherfucker...!"

With more things recently added to his to-do list, the Demon Lord seemed eager to knock out as much as he could here and now.

"Enjoy your final days, King. You're dead meat, and so is Gorgon."

“Oh, I almost forgot. I incinerated that troublesome *cargo*, ship and all. You’re lucky I’m not charging you a fee for that.”

“K-Kiiiing!” Jack roared and finally jumped down into the arena. He would not be satisfied by anything less than tearing King’s head off with his own hands.

The spectators collectively sprung to their feet, exploding in excitement. This was going to be a match no amount of money could buy a seat for.

“Ren, take him back to his family. Treat him with this.” The Demon Lord created a Bandage, the same first-aid item that once mended Harts’s severed leg, and tossed it to Ren.

“Yes, Master.”

She put a hand on the man’s shoulder, and they vanished. They had merely Quick Traveled to the family’s shack in the slums, but the disappearing act only further electrified the arena.

“Ready to die, King? Let’s end this here and now!”

“There was a man here earlier who said something similar. Had fire set on his *rear* end. I think you’re kindred spirits, you and him.”

“Shut your trap!” Jack closed the distance between them in the blink of an eye and swung at the Demon Lord, throwing a punch heavy enough to put a dent in even the most powerful monster. The Demon Lord switched off his Assault Queller and dodged the punch with ease. Jack kept on swinging with both fists, each of them fast enough to knock the head off the shoulders of an ordinary fighter. The Demon Lord continued to dodge Jack’s strikes, doing so with the minimum amount of movement necessary.

“Good form. It seems your confidence wasn’t *entirely* groundless. A good model for hand-to-hand combat.”

“What do you know, you stupid mercenary?!” With a big inhale, Jack activated all of his skills at once, intending to finish the fight before the Demon Lord had the chance to cast any of his mysterious spells.

—Diamond Fist, Diamond Body, Zero to Sixty, Drum Up Courage, Numb the Pain

Jack's Attack, Defense, and Dexterity skyrocketed as his body grew in size and his skin hardened. Additionally, he wouldn't lose Stamina nor feel pain for a set amount of time, turning Jack into a killing machine. Jack's blood seared in his veins, and he exhaled a scathing breath.

"It's over, King!" He charged at the Demon Lord with such speed that Jack now perceived the world around him in slow motion; even noises from the crowd now warped. Leaving his senses behind him, Jack unleashed a devastating blow. With his first step, the multilayered, stone-paved floor beneath them shattered, his arm rocketing into the Demon Lord. A calamitous impact echoed through the air as the entire arena was covered by a fog of dust. Jack, along with everyone in the audience, imagined the Demon Lord blown to bits.

When the air cleared some, however...the Demon Lord was still standing, holding Jack's fist in his palm with ease.

"What the...?"

"Not a bad punch, but really lacking in strength compared to the players. You thought you could play dictator when *this* is the best you've got?"

The Demon Lord raised Jack high into the air with the same hand and threw him into the metal bars. An ear-splitting crash rang through the arena, silencing the spectators.

"Take the L. As long as you stay out of our business, we won't start anything more with you." Despite being in the middle of combat, the Demon Lord comfortably lit his cigarette and offered a truce. This was simply a misunderstanding to him, and he had no intention of turning this into a full-on, blood-soaked war between him and the Jack of All Trades.

On the other hand, Jack pushed the metal debris off of him and slowly rose to his feet. Unlike before, his eyes now shone with a cool, collected glare. "Pretty good, King. Didn't think you'd make me go full force..."

"Oh? Were you playing for my amusement until now?"

Jack ignored him and lit the cigar in his mouth. He stripped off his tiger-striped gown and activated the Binding carved all over his body. He was a

fistfighter and lacked magic, so he chose to tattoo magic into his skin, which would shorten his life when cast. This may have been a tactic that only gladiators used, desperate to make it through the day at any cost.

“Congratulations, King. I don’t fight like this against just anybody.”

“Is that so? Keep it short, will you?”

“I’ve lived through decades of hell, right here...” Runes glowed on Jack’s arms, activating the Fire Whip Binding and imbuing his fists with Fire magic, which inflicted continuous damage to his enemies after contact. “Jeered and stoned by those rotten nobles and spectators, my life and death became a bet made on a whim...” Another set of runes glowed on his legs, triggering High Wings, the same ability that Azur once used, which drastically improved the user’s Dexterity. “I’ve killed beasts and monsters, day in and day out, and made it by the skin of my teeth...” Runes glowed on Jack’s thick pectorals, triggering Breath of Undine, which paused Stamina expenditure and restored it over time. “You will never understand what I had to go through to make it this far...” A final set of runes lit up on his back, triggering Titanic Wall, providing him with a powerful Defense against all forms of physical and magical attacks.

In addition to all of the skills Jack already activated, he now carried all four elements of magic in his flesh. His already catastrophic strength had reached the level of a fighting deity. Violent torrents of wind roared from Jack and swept through the entire colosseum, keeping the spectators quiet. “*I will win. I will always win! To make it to tomorrow!*” Jack sprinted so quickly that it appeared as if he had teleported, throwing his fist straight at the Demon Lord’s face.

Deflecting the fist, the Demon Lord let slip a slight frown. *Hot, hot, hot!*

Once on the move, Jack was unstoppable. Without fear of exhaustion, he unleashed a storm-like flurry of fists.

The Demon Lord dodged and parried these fists, much to the amazement of the spectators, but he was not having a good time. *Come on, this is... It’s hot! Hot! I can’t take it anymore!* He maintained a cool composure on the surface, but he was beginning to regret mocking Endjoy.

Meanwhile, Jack only seemed to accelerate, culminating in a rapid inhale before unleashing his most powerful move. “Liger Knuckle!” A calamitous punch

struck the Demon Lord square in his chest, blowing him away like a leaf in the wind, slamming him against the wall of the arena. The next instant, cracks shot out from the Demon Lord along the wall, causing that portion of the arena to collapse. This was to be the coup de grâce for Jack to assert his dominance as the undisputed champion of the colosseum. “That ought to show you who’s the boss, eh, King?”

Jack’s confident smirk twisted into an expression of agony.

Sodom’s Fire had pierced Jack’s left leg. The Demon Lord had leisurely thrown the dagger as he was being blown away by the impact. Black flames erupted from the dagger, engulfing Jack and afflicting him with Burn damage. Jack screamed, unable to bear the agony.

The Demon Lord rose to his feet, dusted off his suit, and lit a cigarette. He looked as if he had not taken any damage at all. In fact, he had taken the hit on purpose to put some distance between him and Jack’s uncomfortably hot Fire Whip Binding.

“So you’re throwing a tantrum over your past, got it... How narrow-minded of you to then make other people miserable. You’ll never be good enough to rule a country, let alone anything more than a leader of brain-dead apes,” the Demon Lord verbally dunked on the fallen Jack and turned to leave.

Then a voice called from behind him. A voice that belonged to Jack but wasn’t his.

“A woeful state for my dear servant...”

“Forgive me...Master...Rookfell...”

“Accept my strength... Laugh in the face of defeat, and devour it! Become prideful!”

Jack rose as if he was called by the eerie voice coming from his own mouth. As black mist enveloped him, changing him into something monstrous down to his very bones, Jack recalled a distant memory when this grand devil had appeared in the colosseum.

Rookfell, the grand devil with the lion’s head, had been summoned—or happened to stop by on a whim—and trampled over everyone in attendance.

The royal family, the fighters, the spectators, they were all torn limb from limb, their innards spilling over the ground. The select few who managed to survive the one-sided massacre were given the blood of the grand devil, not out of mercy, of course, but entertainment.

There was nary a chance that any of the survivors could withstand the blood of a grand devil, so nearly all of them writhed in slow, agonizing death, as if they had been dosed with poison. The only survivor of the transfusion was Jack.

A gag order was issued to cover up this incident and the colosseum was shut down. This was when Jack had finally gained his freedom. Once he gained power in Euritheis, Jack was also the one to reopen the colosseum, and he did so with the sole intention of inflicting the same hellish suffering that he had endured onto others. To shower this land with endless devastation.

“I never lose... The entire world will soon be mine! Fame, women, gold, glory, everything! I’ll squeeze the useless scum of this city for every last drop they’ve got!”

Jack’s skeleton had enlarged, shifting him into a liger. Unlike a Firebrand, Jack was forced to serve the grand devil and undergo metamorphosis. If one were to label him anything, he might have been categorized as a hellbeast-hybrid. A liger’s split parentage between a lion and a tiger embodied Jack’s essence perfectly.

The transformation drew screams of terror from the crowd.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Jack’s a devil?!”

“R-Run! We’re going to die if we stay here!”

“No way, I’m seeing this through! This fight’s a once-in-a-lifetime event!”

The Demon Lord’s brow twitched. He sensed the presence of a *level 30*... A maxed-out player.

“You’ve earned the right to stand before me,” he said.

“Fool... A human stands no chance against me, the embodiment of one of the seven deadly sins: Pride.”

“Deadly sin? I took care of one of those not too long ago.”

“As if!”

Jack swung his claws at astonishing speed, which the Demon Lord parried with Sodom’s Fire. The pair maneuvered through the arena at great speed, clashing at times. All the spectators could see were sparks flying in the air.

After dodging or blocking the liger’s claws a few times, the Demon Lord wondered aloud, “Strange... You’re much weaker than Olgan’s dad. How does that work?”

“Trying to talk your way out? Tough luck.”

As the de facto dictator of Euri, Jack was privy to information of all kinds. Naturally, some of it pertained to Olgan’s father, the grand devil that embodied Sloth.

“You can run, but you can’t hide, King!” Jack barked.

Meanwhile, the Demon Lord kept muttering to himself as he parried attacks. Despite being engaged in combat, he looked like a researcher working in his lab. “I assume devils have higher base stats and stat increases in exchange for slow level progression. Humans have an easier time leveling but have lower base stats and increase rates.”

The Demon Lord’s assessment was largely correct. He and his advisors all required astronomical EXP to level up, making it easier for him to understand this system: the strong required their own set of restrictions.

Jack thrashed his claws as if he was burning out his life force in this battle, knocking the Demon Lord away. An average man would have been torn to shreds by one attack.

“From the day I was born, everyone has taken from me. Now it’s my turn to take back what I’m owed from those scum. After I crush you, *King*, I’ll take out the king of this country too.”

“A world built on the misfortune of others won’t last long. Sooner or later, it will be overturned.” The Demon Lord didn’t add the last phrase that was on his mind: *like the Empire*. Even if he had, Jack would have had no clue as to what he

was talking about.

“Kill you, kill Gorgon, and the world is mine,” Jack boasted. “Everyone will feel the hell I suffered!”

“You’ve barked enough... Don’t smear your shit onto other people, you little bitch.”

Jack turned quadruped, storing up catastrophic strength.

The audience seemed to pick up on the unprecedented power in the arena, as they ran for their lives in panic.

The Demon Lord prepared to counter the attack by activating several of his skills at once.

—Fighting Spirit, Intimidate, Fake Out, Equal to None

Explosive power exuded from the Demon Lord, clashing in the air with Jack’s energy.

“This whole world is mine!” Jack bellowed. “No one can stop me!”

“Don’t you dare claim a world when all you want is cheap revenge.”

Jack charged, like a beast unchained. This attack would sunder even a powerful devil.

The Demon Lord stared Jack down and declared, “There is no room for you in *my* world!”

They collided in the center of the arena with a flash, followed by the roaring sound of their impact that seemed to tear the very air around them.

“How...did I...lose...?”

Jack, of course, was the one to fall. His stature shrunk, reverting to his more human form. Having lost his balance, he collapsed onto the ground, sprawled out. He gazed up at the dome ceiling of the colosseum for the first time in a long time. The sight of it signified his defeat... He had lost his tomorrow.

“I’m not...done...”

If left alone, Jack would soon draw his last breath.

The Demon Lord, a cigarette still in his mouth, calmly looked down at Jack. “If you strove for power because you hated the world as it was or hated those who made your life miserable, you should have built a country filled with happiness. That would have been the best revenge.” The Demon Lord produced a Bottle of Water, twisted the cap off, and dumped the contents onto Jack’s face.

“Everyone who degraded you, mocked you, despised you... They would have all sung high praises of you and your rule. True revenge is making people like them beg for a place in your world.” The Demon Lord turned and left without a second thought.

The Water had healed Jack just enough to keep him alive, which might have been worse than death at this point.

Ren appeared beside the Demon Lord, walking with him. “Are you not going to kill him, Master?”

“The people of this country can clean up their own mess.”

“This will bring an end to the dictatorship of the Jack of All Trades.”

“Every dictator is overthrown sooner or later. For him, it happened to be today,” the Demon Lord said in a meaningful way, despite the fact that he had put no such thought into his actions. He had lashed out of pure frustration, and Jack happened to be there.

Seeing him and Ren leave without another word, the audience began talking to each other.

“What just happened...?”

“King took out Jack!”

“Wh-What’s going to happen now?”

“King’s the new don of the capital...”

“This is crazy! We have to tell everybody!”

The power structure of the capital had been turned upside down in a single night. The Demon Lord’s impulsive actions had culminated in a usurpation.

Remaining SP — 640P

The Butterfly Approaches

——The Golden Casino, Meeting Room.

The Demon Lord's advisors were hard at work, Tahara alone wearing a troubled expression, groaning and scratching his head at times. While Kondo was just playing video games under the table, neither Tahara nor Yu expected any productivity from him anyway.

"Is something wrong?" Yu asked.

"It's smooth sailing... But depending on which areas the boss sets up, we're going to be short on skilled *and* unskilled labor."

The eastern wastelands of Holylight had a small population to begin with, and simply leveling the uninhabited desert land would require a great number of hands on deck. The man-hours required were compounded by Tahara's high expectations for quality and the lack of heavy machinery in this world.

"Even I can't clone people or turn them into skilled technicians overnight."

"I know." Yu could eliminate any ailment and heal any injury, but she was not given the ability to create human beings from scratch nor the power to resurrect the dead, of course. "If we want to increase the population, I need to bear the Secretary's offspring—"

"Yep, good luck with that. Really mean it," Tahara dismissed Yu, having expected the comment. He gazed up at the ceiling. Not even a supergenius like him could just fix a population problem.

However, while the Demon Lord was in a drunken slumber, Ren had sent a Communication.

Hello, Tahara.

Is that Ren?! Man, I've been waiting for you to come for ages!

I propose we exchange information on our current situations.

I second that!

They relayed what they had each experienced in this world so far in a few words, with each of them filling in the gaps.

In the Infinity Game, the advisors were given almost free reign when it came to anything regarding the arena. On other matters, however, they were in constant power struggles with the higher-ups of the Empire and its various factions.

This was why Ren and Tahara relished the freedom and excitement of strategizing and constructing a political arc for the Demon Lord. While their Communication was mostly a two-way update, they seemed to be enjoying the process nonetheless.

There are nearly two thousand residents starving in the slums here, Ren explained, not to go rogue, but to keep small matters off of the Demon Lord's plate, especially after he so sagely (or so she thought) illuminated her on the futility of saving only a handful of people in the short term.

Bossman did mention pulling in labor from the outside! Send them all over, like, yesterday! Tell them we got food that's finger-lickin' good or something!

I don't think I can say that.

Come on!

Unlike Ren, Tahara had no delusion that the Demon Lord was doing any of this out of kindness, and believed it was merely a tactic to solve their labor shortage.

Once Ren began retelling the Demon Lord's clash against the Jack of All Trades, Tahara's shoulders began to quiver until he burst out laughing just as the Communication concluded.

"Bah ha ha ha! Our boss is stone cold!"

"What was so funny that it made you look even more like an idiot?"

"Just how cutthroat the chief is. As soon as he touched down, he pitted two bears against each other."

Tahara relayed the story, which drew some uncharacteristic laughs from Yu, as the story seemed to appeal to her. She found pure delight in the idea of having lowly guinea pigs fight each other without their group lifting a finger.

“Pitting the filth against each other with a bronze coin...” Yu finally broke, covering her mouth to hold in her own laughter, her shoulders now quivering.

Kondo was shaking for another reason entirely, but decided not to go anywhere near what was going on and returned his eyes to his video game.

“All of that at zero cost too,” Tahara added. “I can’t believe it. If we don’t get a move on, he’s going to finish *clearing up* the North.”

“I agree. While the Secretary’s taking over Euritheis, I’ll make sure *they’ll* come together against Dona.”

“You bet. Let’s take anyone we can and get this over with.”

Both Tahara and Yu held a terrifying skill called Propaganda. In the game, the skill was a sort of defense mechanism that concealed various information about the user, but it had a much more varied use in this world, as it could also be used to bolster rumors and create a social climate to the user’s advantage. With two users of such a sinister skill, they could do incredible damage to the world, certainly enough to plunge a nation into chaos.

“We’ve been holding back on Propaganda, but we can’t pull punches now.”

“I concur.”

“Oh, and the other Butterfly’s on her way.”

“We’re getting to the finishing touches.”

They were speaking of the Madam’s sister, the queen of the art world. Once they had her on their side, this Game was as good as over.

Harts and the military nobles were already readying their forces with the Madam’s reinforcements, and while the Demon Lord and Ren were playing out their rom-com up north, the other advisors were tirelessly at work.

Tahara and Yu would flood Holylight with the following rumors:

“Harts is preparing to take down Dona.”

“The military and central nobles have joined forces, gathering soldiers for the battle.”

“Big money from Suneo is backing the effort.”

“Dona sent an assassin against the Holy Maiden Luna.”

As the Madam leaked these rumors to the noble guests of the village, Tahara shared them with the laborers and Yu with her patients. As nobles were creatures extremely keen on self-preservation, they would be sent into a massive tizzy. Holylight’s pre—Demon Lord power structure would have dictated that anyone side with Dona without a second thought, but Suneo’s financial backing would complicate the decision. In a large-scale civil war like this, neutrality was not an option; choose the wrong side, and one’s entire clan would fall from grace.

“Bada bing, bada boom. We got ourselves a traitor to the nation.”

The process was as easy to them as cooking a one-pot recipe, while the effects of their scheming would prove catastrophic. As soon as Tahara and Yu set their eyes on Dona, his days were numbered.

“Now how will I play with this Dona... Maybe I’ll feed him bite by bite to my Starving Fireflies, starting from his toes.”

“And what are those, exactly...? Some kind of bug?”

“They glow beautifully when they’re fed human meat. They even show different colors depending on the day of the week.”

“Forgot about your wacky menagerie... Not that I ever want a tour,” Tahara chuckled awkwardly and averted his gaze, but not out of pity for Dona. Tahara had a philosophy that all of his nemeses should be killed, and holding back against them in any way could be to his own detriment.

“The Secretary’s with Ren, right...?” Yu asked.

“Hm? Yeah.”

“That goody-two-shoes is playing teacher’s pet, no doubt.”

“Not so sure about that...”

Tahara remembered that the Secretary only ever saw Ren as one of his pieces, without any emotions towards her one way or the other. He only ever sought out talent, not the individual. Tahara also knew that the same policy applied to him. While he had sensed a sort of amusement on Kunai's part towards Akane or Kondo's ridiculousness, it seemed more like a curious observation than any form of affection. Tahara assumed that the Demon Lord's attitude towards Luna followed the same principle.

"In any case, I think the chief's got a better chance as he is now."

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah, he's still scary...but he's gotten more relaxed, like he can sit back."

"I'm sure it helps to have the weight of the Empire off of his shoulders."

The Sleepless Castle was once home to the best of the best from all corners of the Empire, but they still comprised a minuscule force in comparison to the rest of the tumultuous nation. It was guarded by Hakuto Kunai and his eight advisors, supported by five thousand automatons and a decent fleet of battleships to intimidate the players, but that was no comparison to the entirety of the Empire that spanned over 60% of the world.

Now that the rest of the Empire was no longer breathing down their necks, the advisors were overcome with a sense of freedom.

"If it wasn't for our gracious boss, we'd have all been hung at some point."

Yu agreed with Tahara. The advisors were only able to maintain their status because of Kunai's unrelenting scheming that eliminated any political opponents.

"It was fun to watch him kick all of our adversaries off of their pedestals, even making them walk off themselves. Do you remember that Sando who kept coming after our seats? After his fall, he was made to join the fray among the players. The way he blubbered...!"

"Yeah, I remember! He was crying, all snot-nosed. Took about twenty shots from the players to blow him to smithereens!"

Yu chuckled again. "A fitting end for that filth."

Kondo, meanwhile, in an effort to avoid engaging in any part of the conversation, concentrated on his game of trying to help an old man escape from a garden. The sound of his video game was muted, possibly because he was reprimanded for it by another advisor.

“Hey, Yu... How much do you remember of the *old days*?”

“Huh? Aren’t you too young to have dementia?”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

Tahara remembered massacring the unending stream of players, made up of everyone from criminals, capital citizens, and even volunteers. Otherwise, he had a few powerful memories of the happy days he spent with his sister in the distant past. His other memories, however, were blurry at times, as if they were encased in a white fog, where he couldn’t even remember the timeline for some of them.

He expressed this to Yu, and she had experienced a similar phenomenon.

“What do you think? Some kind of side effect of coming to this world?”

“Considering that we really are in another world entirely...I can’t deny the possibility.”

“What about you, Kondo?”

“Huh...? I-I only remember playing video games...”

“I should have known better than to ask you.”

The advisors talked of this and that as they finished up their work, but they would not find out for some time that even the don of Euritheis had fallen from grace.

——A travel road to eastern Holylight.

My silly sister. How long is she going to chase that impossible dream of hers...?

A giant, high-end carriage rolled down the road surrounded by a copious number of guards, obviously protecting a person of great status. The flag

waving above the carriage depicted a stark yellow butterfly that signified the presence of Buttersauce Butterfly, a noble among nobles. Considering the added influence of her sister, the crest carried significant weight in Holylight.

You think I'm a charity case? You'll see... Buttersauce chuckled menacingly, her hefty figure shaking. She held a paper in her hand: an invitation for a one-night stay at Rabbi's Hot Springs Resort. Her sister had sent her this invitation a long time ago, which Buttersauce had been ignoring. After she and her sister had had practically no contact for years, Buttersauce wanted to spit on this *charity* her sister had suddenly decided to spring on her.

However, as the reputation of the Hot Springs Resort grew with time, Buttersauce had a change of heart. Traveling was an essential part of noble society, especially for the leader of a faction like Buttersauce.

My foolish sister who never learned to grow up... I wonder what ridiculous mess she's causing to throw a pity party for herself.

The sisters had parted ways for one reason: their pursuit of beauty. Because of an ancestral curse, both sisters were plagued with inexplicable weight gain since their formative years, which only compounded with age. Their weight had become the butt of many jokes in glamorous high society, leading Buttersauce to seclude herself from others, locking herself in. Meanwhile, Butterscotch bounced back, continuing to attend high society events despite the mockery and ridicule, pouring in an almost pathetic amount of energy into losing weight.

Stupid sister... Your efforts ultimately amounted to nothing. Buttersauce scoffed, almost wanting to degrade her sister for fruitlessly causing commotions at noble events.

She, on the other hand, had found the world of fine art and delved deep into its expression of beauty. If she couldn't become beautiful herself, she was going to surround herself with beauty. Moreover, Buttersauce began creating her own art.

Butterscotch had insulted Buttersauce's decision as cowardice, and Buttersauce retorted that her sister was wasting her life chasing an impossible dream.

Years passed since their falling out, and even when they happened to attend

the same functions, they never so much as met each other's eyes.

At least I've been feeling a little lighter lately... Buttersauce's size usually put a lot of wear on her bones and joints, giving her pains all over her body. Combined with the pressure on her shoulders and back from sitting and painting for hours at a time, her lifestyle was causing a lot of damage to her large body.

"We're almost at the village of Rabbi, madam," the coachman called.

Through the carriage window, Buttersauce saw the dried earth of the eastern wasteland. It was almost inconceivable that her sister, with her affinity for glitz and glamor, chose to seclude herself out here for *rehabilitation*.

And she even shook hands with those savage military nobles... Pity flickered in Buttersauce's eyes. She saw this as her sister's one last tantrum, involving the entire nation. As if she could hear her sister cry for help, Buttersauce twisted her face into a frown. *Stupid, stupid sister... When will you snap out of this delusion of yours?*

Already exhausted, she looked out the carriage window and let out an "Oh!" as she spotted what appeared to be a forest. She immediately called for the coachman to halt. While she could barely see through the sandstorm, the silhouette of a forest was unmistakably there.

"How is there a forest here...? Wait... It's somehow different from any forest I know."

Buttersauce hurriedly climbed out of the carriage and began rapidly drawing in the sketchbook she always carried with her. She thought she had seen a glimpse of something divine in those woods. Some sort of pure magic she had never seen before. It was like Buttersauce, with her keen eye for beauty, was beholding a grand waterfall that emanated a kind of magnificence that reached one's soul.

"Don't tell me... My sister *built* these woods just because there was nothing around here?" Buttersauce scoffed, imagining the astronomical cost to achieve such a thing. Of course, she was a huge spender in her own right when it came to art.

When Buttersauce was finishing up her quick sketch, she heard a memorable voice in her ear.

“That is the Healing Forest. It piqued your interest, I take it...”

Buttersauce wondered how long the man wearing a City States outfit had been quietly standing. Her guards began to react to Tahara in his tuxedo, but Buttersauce stopped them with the raise of her hand.

“It’s enchanting... I can hardly believe my sister was responsible for it.”

“She isn’t, I’m afraid. The forest was built by our leader, Hakuto Kunai. Inside the village, there is a stunning, historical fountain.”

“A fountain... Is that your attempt at humor?” Buttersauce gave a dry laugh.

Trees could be planted by force, even out in the desert, albeit at a ridiculous cost, but a fountain of *water* couldn’t exist anywhere in eastern Holylight.

“The wishes of our leader become reality...”

The man’s eyes flashed blue for a moment, and Buttersauce’s heart tolled loudly. She saw that he was a stunner when she first noticed him, but that look awakened a feminine beast within her that had long lain dormant.

“Our leader is unfortunately out at the moment, but he has instructed us to provide you with the warmest welcome our village has to offer... Welcome to the world of our leader, madam...”

Buttersauce took Tahara’s hand and felt warmth fire through her body: perhaps a pang of romance.

Where that hand would lead her awaited a world created by the Demon Lord, a world that no one else could have conceived of. The other Butterfly now approached the precipice of that world.

While misunderstandings only accelerated around the Demon Lord’s antics, another battle was about to commence in the village of Rabbi. With the ambitious nobles gathering their battalions to the west, turmoil in Holylight was approaching a boiling point.

Great chaos and destruction would finally pave the road to a miracle.

Memorial: The World in Red

—One day in the year 2007.

The development team was enthusiastically playtesting Akira's game, where players were gathered at an area and made to fight each other until the last man standing. Unlike today, the battle royale was an unexplored genre of online gaming. What's worse, Akira's iteration had a time limit of one week, after which the players' levels, stats, inventories, and money were all reset to zero. To compensate, he had included sidequest-esque elements like fishing, gambling, and base building, as well as survival aspects that required the players to gather food and fuel.

"Graphics are a bit dated...which won't be too hard to fix." One of the members began exploring his character's spawn area, his afro bouncing. "Gotta start by exploring... Huh? I obtained a '?'? What does that mean...?" The developer flipped through the documentation to discover that any found item had to be analyzed, *and* it cost SP to do so. "Fuck, that's annoying... Huh? A *rock*?! You couldn't have *analyzed* that by looking at it?!"

—**"Rock" was added to Jace's Database.**

The afro-haired developer stared at the system message, wide-eyed. He equipped his character with the randomly assigned weapon (an axe) and attacked a nearby tree with it. He picked up the item that was yet again labeled with a question mark.

"Ah, so that's how... Analyze Item..."

—**"Charcoal" was added to Jace's Database.**

After having been involved in so many game development cycles, he wised up to the root of the system. "The numbers get reset, but your experience and knowledge are kept..."

The developer moved through the area and opened the in-game map. The screen was all black, save for the small area his character had just traversed.

Forest Area Discovered — 0.1%

Skills Earned — 1%

Items Found — 0.1%

Cash In — 0%

The developer flipped through each screen to find these displays and knew that his assumption was correct. At the same time, he was impressed that Akira's game knew how to tickle the collector in the players. These numbers were begging to be brought up to 100%, and filling the database would become a race among players.

"Fighting *and* collecting, huh? This is pretty... Wait, what the hell is going on?!"

His screen was flashing red and shaking. He made his character turn around to find a female avatar, in a bikini of all things, pointing a rifle at him. "We're playtesting, Jenny!" He shouted into his headset.

From it returned an annoying laugh. "The weak must die! It's the law of the jungle! Jungle justice!"

"Knock it off! You're killing me! For real!"

He tried to run, but the shaking red screen made it difficult for him to control. Worse yet, his character was simply running in circles: an obviously bad move. Panic made people do stupid things, and that was also true in video games.

"For real...! I gotta heal! Heal!"

"You can run, but you can't hide! The wolf lives, Jaces and pigs will die!"

"Stop! Noooooo!"

His screen turned black, accompanied by the following text:

—Game Over.

You have been shot dead by Jenny.

X days, XX hours, and XX minutes until the next Game begins...

Here's a message from your killer:

The afro-haired developer was quietly shaking at the matter-of-fact display, but leapt out of his seat as the message from Jenny faded in.

You know, you look like this Japanese character called Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo.

"Motherfucker! You're dead! You hear me?! You're dead!"

The developer ran out of the room, starting an IRL scuffle.

The team began to become deeply invested in the Game, with enthusiasm at times and with savage competitiveness at others. While each member of the team was talented in their own right, many of them had personality quirks that foreshadowed troubles brewing in the future of the project.

"Are you in, Miki?" Aoki fiercely rapped the door of the director's office and barged in before there was an answer. This executive office was complete with a kitchenette and shower, which was provided to each higher-up of 42-OMG.

A man sat at the desk, dressed like an English gentleman of the good old days. "Hello, Aoki. I'm glad to see you doing well."

"Shut up. How long do you expect me to babysit that kid?"

"Have you any grievances with your current assignment?"

"No shit, I do. I don't even know why I'm stuck with that snot-nose."

"Our president has... Oh, there's no smoking in this room, I'm afraid."

"Fuck off, you're flying home any day now... You never use this room anyway."

Aoki irritably lit his cigar and slumped down onto the couch. The juxtaposition of a dignified English gentleman against a savage bandit like Aoki was comical in and of itself.

"You asked how long. Well, until the project is completed, of course."

"Get the fuck out of here! I've got a shitload of other projects—"

“Those have all been delegated, per the president’s orders.”

“Goddamn it...! What the hell is...” Aoki scoffed through his nose and leaned back onto the couch. He had no idea why Akira’s project was being prioritized. “Yeah, the kid’s got talent and instinct. Maybe he’s a genius. So what? There’s plenty of talent lying around, all around the world.”

With their global reach, Aoki couldn’t help but wonder why 42-OMG seemed infatuated with Akira.

“Development of VR technology is our top priority.”

“No shit again, Sherlock. Why use *his* game?”

“I haven’t a clue. These are all orders given by the president.” Miki wore a warm smile and sipped on his tea, performing even such a mundane action with refined elegance.

“Something about using it in medicine too... Is that going to bring us any dough?”

“Oh, loads.”

Using VR, 42-OMG wanted to virtually construct 3D models of the human anatomy, as well as simulate surgery, experience surgery from the POV of the surgeon, treat PTSD, aid physical therapy, neurological therapy, and so on and so forth. All in all, they believed that VR technology would become a standard component of various industries outside of entertainment.

“We will be moving forward with various experiments and development. Please bear in mind that the project assigned to you is one of them.”

Aoki stood without answering and turned to leave.

Mikimoto called from his seat, “Depending on how this project fares, the president is considering promoting you to VP.”

Aoki turned around, astounded. It seemed more eerie than exciting, as chills ran down his spine. “What are you and the president getting at...?”

“The success of this project, of course.”

“What does this project mean...? What does that kid—?”

“Nothing a figurehead like me would know... The president will be flying in soon, so your questions may be answered then.” The English gentleman still wore his friendly smile.

Aoki left the room, scowling. Any question he asked Miki was like punching sand.

Mikimoto soon flew back to England.

A month flew by.

Without so much as a knock, Aoki barged into Akira’s office where numerous monitors lined the wall and his desk space, each of them displaying complex code, 3D renderings, or models of human body parts.

“Still haven’t gone home, huh?”

“Commuting’s a waste of time.”

Without so much as turning to look at Aoki, Akira continued strumming multiple keyboards at a breakneck speed in such a hurry that it would have unsettled anyone watching.

Aoki remarked with a sigh, “It’s like a supervillain’s lair in here. You know, like in those robot anime?”

“I don’t care about your nostalgia from, what? The turn of the century?”

“I *was* born in the twentieth century, you idiot.”

“Can’t this wait? What is it? I have to move the shading here...”

Akira was working on painstaking work, like animating the grass in the wind or calculating the shading based on the direction of the sun. Evidently, he couldn’t stand not getting his hands on these minute details.

“Ono, we’re going out to get dinner. Stop working for a bit.”

“Later. And why don’t you just eat in the cafeteria? It’s quick.”

“Just get ready. I’m hungry.”

“See that tank over there? Eat as much turtle feed as you want— Ow!”

Aoki slugged Akira on the head without another word, forcing his work to a

halt. He was a muscular man with experience in various martial arts. "It's on me. Just shut up and come with."

"What's going on...? I'm going to order the most expensive thing on the menu... Bird's nest soup, matsutake, body sushi... Mostly body sushi."

"Shut up! Let's just go!"

They descended to the parking lot and approached Aoki's Bentley, a luxury car from England that cost as much as a house in some regions.

Akira stared at the car and scratched his head. "I knew it... You evade taxes, don't you...?"

"Just get in, already."

The Bentley drove out into the city as pedestrians pointed and stared at the car.

Akira leaned back into the passenger's seat and remarked, "Ha! Everyone's staring." He felt a sense of exhilaration for garnering attention by just riding in a car.

"You do a good job, you can ride fast cars...and hot chicks."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Money talks. You got some growing up to do if you're still chasing some perfect vision."

Akira scoffed and watched the cityscape glide past the window, realizing that he hadn't seen the outside in a while.

Eventually, they came to a large intersection and pulled into a nearby parking lot.

"Let's go."

"I don't know what this place serves, but I'm ordering something worth my time."

"Knock yourself out." Aoki led Akira to a ramen stand set up on a wide stretch of sidewalk, with sets of tables and chairs arranged around it, many of them populated. "Hey, chief. Give me the usual," Aoki called as he sat at the largest

table there and lit his cigar. There was a 'reserved' card on the table; apparently, he was a regular.

Akira took his seat, undaunted, and lit his cigarette. "Is this where you get your body sushi? Looks like a ramen stand."

"What part of it *doesn't* look like a ramen stand to you?"

The owner of the stand brought a bottle of beer and two glasses to the table without saying a word.

Akira wanted to make a gripe or two, but the beer stole his attention. He had cut out drinking ever since he started at 42-OMG. "Drinking and driving crosses a line, even for a bandit like you. What are you going to do, sell the car and bribe the cop?"

"I'll call for a driver, dumbass."

It was customary in Japan for a subordinate to pour his superior's drink, but Aoki sloshed Akira's portion into his glass.

Akira pondered the golden ale for a while, as Aoki drank straight from the bottle and gulped down all the rest.

"Ahh... That's good."

"Damn it... I'm trying to keep sober, over here..."

"Sober? What the fuck is the point of that? Pussy."

As if she was waiting for him to finish the drink, a young female employee brought another bottle. With an apron and a bandana around her head, she looked like the rather active type.

"Hello, Mister Aoki!"

"Hey. I'm looking forward to some good food tonight."

"Is he one of your employees? You've never brought anyone here before!"

"The most annoying little brat I've ever had to work with."

"Oh, haha. Sit back; we'll get you served soon!"

"Thanks." Aoki grabbed the bottle again, drowning the beer down his throat.

Akira's gaze wandered to and fro until he finally grabbed the glass. "W-Well, I can't turn down a drink my boss poured for me. The woes of a working man..."

"Don't drink it then."

"Shut up! Of course I'm going to drink it!" Akira bellowed, then cheered at the first taste of beer in a long time. It seemed absence made the flavor grow stronger.

"Here you are! Our specialty skewers," the waitress announced and slid a plate of charcoal-grilled skewers onto the table: half with chicken and scallion and the other half a string of thinly sliced beef tongue. The skewers glimmered in the light, their aroma alone guaranteeing an amazing tasting experience.

"They only serve ramen and these two kinds of skewers, but you can't go wrong with either," Aoki said and tore into one of them.

Akira, too, took a bite from the chicken and scallion. The umami of the marinade and the tender chicken twirled in his mouth, making him groan in approval. "That's delicious. It's incredible." While Akira worked his way down the skewer, a pint was placed next to him. Akira took it and began double-fisting the beer and the skewer. "This tongue is legit too...! Excuse me, can I get another one of these?!"

"Coming right up!"

"And another pint!" Akira called, chugging the one in his hand.

The waitress laughed. Her smile alone was enough to make Akira want to come back in the near future.

Skewers and beers were brought to the table and promptly devoured. Similar scenes were happening at other tables, making the ramen stand seem like a little paradise on the sidewalk.

"Nice girl, right? Cute smile. Energetic," Aoki said.

"Hm? Guess so... Hold on. Are you coming here to go after her?"

"Does she look old enough for me, you dumbass?"

"You're a *paying customer*, then. You're a disgrace to all bearded kind... You better turn yourself in— Ow!"

“Your dumb ass made me lose all hope in the public education system.”

After Aoki had switched his drink from beer to shochu, their main course was served: ramen. It was a simple iteration with a soy sauce base, but Akira detected a hint of garlic in its aroma, which was superb enough to make one’s stomach growl just from smelling it. Akira scooped a spoonful of soup and tasted it well before gulping it down.

“That’s good... I think I’ve been saying that about everything.”

“Hmph. At least your tongue’s screwed on right,” Aoki simply said, as if he had expected nothing else.

With a twinge of inferiority, Akira snarked, “You said money talks, and you eat ramen all the time?”

“I’ve been around the world when it comes to food. Kaiseki courses worth ten or twenty grand, the best steak there is, delicacies that most people couldn’t dream of getting their hands on... But somehow, I always end up here.”

Seeing Aoki quietly drink, Akira couldn’t find his words. Aoki had traveled the world doing business; he had lived a life so drastically different from his own.

“The president’s flying in tomorrow—”

“What?”

“You’ll be called in for a meeting too.”

With that, Aoki ordered another glass of shochu and lit a cigar.

That’s all you wanted to say? Akira crooked his neck. “Why didn’t you just tell me at the office? Not that I’m complaining. The food’s amazing.”

“The president and Miki are up to something,” Aoki muttered, a thick cloud of smoke around his face.

“What do you mean, ‘up to something’?”

“I don’t know. Just keep your guard up... Miki—or anyone at the headquarters for that matter—doesn’t give a rat’s ass about the *Far East* branch in Japan.”

As a new hire, Akira had no grasp on the dynamic between the company’s headquarters and regional branches. Not that he cared about much else other

than creating a brand new world.

“They finished clearing the debris of that building. Looks like they’re building a memorial in its place.”

“Which building...?”

“You were pretty dazed when it happened... Something about a dog from hell.”

After the bombing, those in the vicinity were interviewed by the police and media who aired specials for days on end about the incident. Akira kept repeating that he saw a massive, three-headed dog with a vacant expression, so the police determined him to be in shock and sent him to a hospital.

“Guess you wouldn’t want to remember... Forget about it. Just remember. Tomorrow.”

Aoki drained the soup portion of his ramen and called for a driver.

Akira quietly slurped his ramen and finished off the last of his beer.

Upon returning to his office, Akira laid down on his couch and closed his eyes. A buzz he hadn’t felt in a while seemed to make Aoki’s words twirl in his mind, taking his thoughts on an unexpected journey. *Headquarters, huh...? Whatever they’re up to, I’m just going to finish my world.* Akira soon resigned himself to the sandman, abandoning his thoughts.

By the time he woke up, it was already late in the afternoon.

Akira drowsily answered the ringing phone. “Uh-huh...?”

“Get your ass up! The president’s going to be here soon! Be ready!” Aoki shouted through the phone.

Akira jumped to his feet and took a quick shower. As he finished getting dressed, his office phone rang again.

“The president’s waiting for you on the rooftop. Mind your manners.”

“Rooftop? Why?”

“How should I know? I’m telling you again: mind your manners. It could come back to bite *me*.”

Hanging up the phone, Akira left his office. Since the elevator did not reach all the way to the rooftop, he was forced to walk up the stairs.

“Why...the hell...are we meeting...on the roof?!” Out of breath, Akira made his way up the stairs and opened the door.

Neverending redness sprawled before him. The sunset engulfed the sky, turning everything a particular shade, from the buildings below to the ground they stood on. Akira even felt a bizarre sensation that the air itself had turned red.

A girl stood before the fencing that outlined the rooftop, her skirt fluttering in the wind. A strange thought came to Akira in the sea of red. *Why do I feel like...I've been here before?* He wondered whether the girl was a part of the redness or if she was the one creating it. It was as if time itself had stopped moving.

Finally, she turned around. “Akira...Ono...” She wore her perfect blonde hair in pigtails, had sapphire eyes, and was a slender stature without much height. She certainly didn’t look like the president of a company, but nonetheless an assertive girl with a perfectly refined beauty about her.



Akira stared at the girl for some time, stunned, before rushing over to her.

“Nice to meet you, President—”

“Stop.” The girl hushed Akira with the point of a finger, much to his confusion. She approached him quietly and gazed up at him with her deep, blue eyes. “Don’t move,” she said.

“O-Okay...”

The girl walked laps around Akira, observing him as if he was a newly discovered species of insect. Akira could only stand there, nonplussed.

“Give me your hand, Ono.”

“Um, like...this?”

“Good boy.”

The girl softly placed her hand on his, looking nostalgic for a moment before staring daggers at Akira, much to his dismay. He had never met anyone so bewildering.

Is this a British greeting or something?! Or can someone like the president of a major company see something in people’s hands? Like palm reading? Am I even sure she’s the president in the first place?!

The girl looked no older than a ninth grader, which was completely incongruent with Akira’s expectation for the ruler of a global corporation.

“Stretch your arm out, Ono.”

“Y-Yes...”

“A little higher. Go to the right. A little bit back. Stop there.”

What the hell am I doing...? My shoulder’s getting tired. Akira moved his arm as if it was the arm of a claw machine. Before he knew it, his hand was placed on top of the girl’s head.

“I-I’m terribly sorry! Excuse me!” Akira ripped his hand away, bowing to show his mortification.

The girl gave Akira murderous glares for a moment before letting out a sigh of resignation.

Crap, I already screwed up... Old Blue Beard Aoki might sock me in the face for that one! But if this girl made even a little bit of sense...! Akira took a step back, awkwardly avoiding the girl's eyes. Knowing that touching someone's hair was more taboo in many foreign countries than it was in Japan, he nervously awaited his verdict.

"You may go now. I'm counting on you," the girl said.

"Th-Thank you." With one last bow, Akira left the rooftop.

Once he was gone, the girl reached her hand out to the sky, as if to dissolve into the vast redness. Whatever her blue eyes were beholding, the girl stood there without moving an inch before quietly uttering, "We finally meet again, after tens of thousands of years... I'm never letting you go, my dear Lucifer."

Postscript

Thank you so much for picking up Volume 7! Kurone Kanzaki, the author, here. Considering the increase in sales tax in Japan, I tried to keep the last volume within a certain page limit, so I decided to throw that out the window for this volume. If you're reading this on paper, you could probably use it as a blunt weapon. What's that? You want *more* pages next time? Very funny, folks...

I hope you've enjoyed the story so far. I tried to put a little bit of everything in this volume: flashbacks, battles in a new environment, the encroaching civil war, and episodes of the past. The newly summoned Ren wreaked havoc in more ways than one. She may appear as the perfect child at first glance, but I had a suspicion that she may become the most difficult for the Demon Lord to deal with, even as I was writing her. Let's see how he fares and how Ren joins the love interest derby (or whatever is going on here).

Let's move on to Jack, who served as our boss for the volume. Yes, he's a villain, but I couldn't bring myself to hate him. His revenge-driven rags-to-riches story could have even made him a protagonist. He took on the huge responsibility of facing off against the Demon Lord in a colored illustration too. I'd love to see the interesting characters of Five Stars make a reappearance sometime. They should be much more agreeable by then.

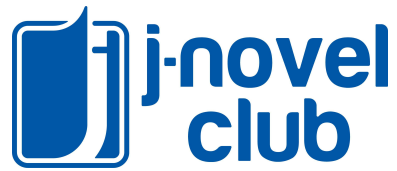
The Madam, who always took the page by storm, finally won the long battle. She and Luna may be the only humans in history to take on an Ancient Devil one-on-one and win.

I'm sure we're all deeply concerned for the Demon Lord... On second thought, I don't think anyone's worried about him, LOL.

You can expect more great battles both on the geographical and political field. I'd love to have you all along for the Demon Lord's journey.

Finally, by the time the volume comes out, there should be a Twitter account for both the novel and the manga series, with hopefully some giveaways. Please give it a follow if you'd like.

Have a fun and healthy 2021!



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Demon Lord, Retry! Volume 7

by Kurone Kanzaki

Translated by Adam Seacord Edited by Jack Diaz

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